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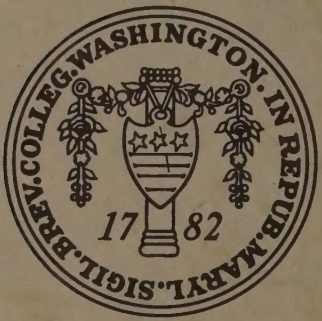

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ROBERT FERGUSSON

BY

A. B. GROSART

FAMOUS SCOTS SERIES

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F3

PREFACE

THE myth that no one reads a preface, I cannot allow to deprive me of the pleasure and privilege of recording here the more than kind helpfulness of many fellow literary workers in this little labour of love. In turning to the forewords to my youthful *Life and Works of Fergusson* (1851), that I might re-thank former friends, I found that of a long roll of names therein, not a single one survives to-day. I alone remain. I may be pardoned feeling the pathos of this.

The same willinghood and actual services of former friends have been shown by many new helpers of the present generation. It would occupy too much space in a book that needs every inch available, to enumerate my correspondents and aiders; but I offer one and all, publicly as already privately, my heartfelt thanks, together with acknowledgments in the several places. It will not, I hope, be held invidious that, besides this general acknowledgment of debt and in their places, I name the following as having rendered me special help, biographically and critically:—Mr. William Keith-Leask, M.A., Aberdeen, who took the pains of carefully reading the whole of my first rough MS.; Rev. J. G. Michie, M.A., Dinnet; Rev. Andrew Christie, M.A., Kildrummy; Lord Aldenham, who did not rest until at India House and Bank of England he had verified the Burnett gift of £100, and not less so the prompt and laborious attention of the officers of both; Lord Rosebery, for books and MSS.; J. Maitland Thomson, Esq., M.A., Advocate, Edinburgh, for countless notes on countless points; the Rev. Walter Macleod, M.A., Register House, Edinburgh, for successful researches in his great storehouse; J. Logie-Robertson, Esq., M.A., for his collected newspaper-cuttings and articles, and other helpfulness; James Colville, Esq., Glasgow, for luminous reading of my chap. xi.; and last

but not least, Mr. Oliphant Smeaton, M.A., Edinburgh, for unfailing attention to numerous commissions.

I can in integrity affirm that I have spared no pains to fulfil a lifelong cherished purpose of adequately writing the Life of Robert Fergusson, and I indulge the hope that at long last something like a worthy Life is now furnished. Exigencies of space compel me to suppress a full bibliography of the Poems, critical Essays home and foreign, notes on Portraits, etc. etc., that I had prepared.

I add that, whilst in no manner of way wishing to forestall criticism whether of matter or form, I must be permitted to ask remembrance of how meagre and inaccurate other Lives of Fergusson were prior to mine of 1851, and to specialise these things as *for the first time* given—the paternal and maternal descent of the Poet traced; that visit to his uncle in the North, whose failure was a fundamental factor in his career, fully told; new light on the home-life and his father's employments and his death-date ascertained, with new letters and papers; his schools and course at St. Andrews University, elucidated from fresh materials; the circumstances of his return to Edinburgh and abandonment of studying for the Kirk vindicated; the advent of Scotland's second vernacular poet with a new note, stated and established; the 'malevolent conscientiousness' of certain biographers on falsely alleged 'dissipation' and misconduct, exposed and refuted, with revelations of Edinburgh society of the period; the relation of Burns to Fergusson, and our claims for Fergusson as a Scottish poet presented and enforced; new light on the final act of the tragedy of his young life; recovery of the facts of the Burnett draft for £100, and an invitation to India that arrived 'too late'; the second marriage of his widowed mother; and not a few other data from authentic documents, *e.g.* birth-entry, burial-entry, etc. etc.

I shall hope that one outcome of this new Life will be to unite 'brither Scots' at home and far away to place a monument in Edinburgh to her young Poet, as Robert Louis Stevenson counselled, and as Andrew Lang thinks of doing himself in a memorial-window at St. Andrews. I do not mean to let this sleep.

ALEXANDER B. GROSART.

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Passing quaint ROBERT HENRYSON,
ROBERT THE FIRST, was FERGUSSON;
Whose 'Farmer's Ingle' still glows red,
'Mongst Doric classics numbered.
Next Scotia wistfully turns
To ROBERT SECOND—ROBERT BURNS:
His 'wreath of holly' he still wears,
Nor Time, nor Change one green leaf seres:[1]
So shall they aye together stand,
Greater and lesser, hand in hand;
Twin-singers of their native Land.
Who shall our heart-homage reprove?
Commingled pride, and ruth, and love.
FERGUSSON'S Life, in youth I writ,
And dar'd my little lamp to lit,
That I might his dim'd name relume;
To fading wreath restore perfume;
Putting the Pharisees to shame
For their self-righteous scorn and blame;
Who sought his memory to stain
With moralising, cheap as vain,—
And golden words shew'd I was heard,
For far and near Scots hearts were stirr'd:
And now again I write of him
In elder years, my eyes still dim
With pity for his sad short life,
Ever with Poverty at strife;
His drudgery for scanty wage,—
A skylark prison'd in a cage;
His friendlessness; his sordid cares;
His tempters with their deft-plac'd snares;
His tragic end; his mere boy's years:
Key-cold the heart that sheds no tears.

A. B. G.

---

[1] Muse of Scotland to Burns—

> 'And wear thou this—she solemn said,
> And bound the holly round my head.'—*The Vision.*

ROBERT FERGUSSON

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION—CLAIMS FOR A PLACE AMONGST 'FAMOUS SCOTS'

. . . 'While the lark sings sweet in air
Still may the grateful pilgrim stop
To bless the spot that holds thy dust.'
THOMAS CAMPBELL *of Burns.*

THAT ROBERT FERGUSSON stands transfigured for all time, in

'the gleam,
The light that never was, on sea or land,
The consecration, and the Poet's dream,'—

from the homage paid to him by ROBERT BURNS—WILLIAM WORDSWORTH—THOMAS CARLYLE—and ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON—selecting four representative names out of many more,—may surely be accepted as sanction of placing him amongst 'Famous Scots,' and of our task of love, the re-writing of his pathetic story.

I know not, therefore, that I can better introduce ROBERT FERGUSSON to Englishmen and Americans and my fellow-countrymen who do not know him as they ought, than by letting the four immortals speak for him and me.

I. ROBERT BURNS.

The keynote of Burns's admiration and gratitude is struck in his autobiographical letter to Dr. Moore, as follows:—

'Rhyme, except some religious pieces that are in print, I had given up; but meeting with Fergusson's Scottish Poems, I strung anew my wildly-sounding lyre with emulating vigour.'

We shall see, hereafter, how critically as well as ethically accurate and generous was the word 'emulating,' to express the outcome of this epoch-making 'meeting with Fergusson's Scottish Poems.'

Before passing on, it may be here anticipatively noted that besides our own biographers and critics, not only Angellier and Demonceau, Traeger and Hincke, but a whole band of French and German translators and interpreters of Burns recognise and accentuate the significance and potency of this 'meeting.' 'Inspirer' is their usual word.

In Verse and Prose alike, Robert Burns was never weary of acknowledging his obligations to his young precursor, as these additional testimonies will witness.

I give first of all his 'Verses written under the portrait of Fergusson, in a copy of that Author's Works, presented to a young lady in Edinburgh, March 19th, 1787':—

> 'Curse on ungrateful man, that can be pleas'd,
> And yet can starve the author of the pleasure!
> O thou, my elder brother in misfortune,
> By far, my elder brother in the Muses,
> With tears I pity thy unhappy fate!
> Why is the Bard unfitted for the world
> Yet has so keen a relish of its pleasures?'

Further,—everyone knows who knows anything of either, that a pilgrimage to the then unnoticed grave of Fergusson was among the earliest acts of Burns after his arrival in Edinburgh, and how he knelt down and with uncovered head and passionate tears kissed the sod that covered the 'revered ashes.' His letter to the Magistrates reveals how genuine was his emotion. It is my privilege to reproduce it from the Second Commonplace Book—a priceless MS. just acquired for the Alloway Museum in Burns's cottage. I have deemed it well to mark the erasures and corrections of the MS. as evidencing the painstaking with which it was written.

'To the Honorable the Bailies of the Canongate, Edinburgh.

Gentlemen,

I am sorry to be told that the remains of Robert Fergusson the for ages to come
so justly celebrated Poet, a man whose talents ∧ will do honour ~~for~~
in your Churchyard
~~ages to come~~, to our Caledonian name, lie ∧ among the ignoble

Dead, unnoticed and unknown ~~in your Churchyard.~~ Some memorial to direct the steps of the Lovers of Scottish Song, when they wish to shed a ~~grateful~~ tear over the "Narrow House" of the Bard who is now no more, is surely a ~~debt~~ tribute due to Fergusson's memory: a ~~debt~~ tribute I wish to have the honor of paying. I petition you then, Gentlemen, ~~to allow~~ your ~~for permis~~ for ∧ permission to lay a simple stone over his revered ashes, to remain an unalienable property to his deathless fame.

I have the honor to be,
Gentlemen,
Your very humble servant,
ROBERT BURNS.'

Willing consent was given, and the 'simple stone' was erected, and still remains, having been well cared for.

By the phrasing—'*lay* a simple stone'—Burns evidently intended a flat stone or *throoch* stone, to cover the entire grave; and, in accord with this, he composed an inscription that would have filled it. An erect or head-stone having been chosen, only one stanza—first of three, it will be seen—was carved on it; but the complete inscription is preserved along with the letter, thus:—

'Epitaph: Here lies ~~the remains of~~ Robert Fergusson, Poet.

He was born 5th September 1751, and died 16th Oct. 1774.

No pageant bearing here nor pompous lay,
"No story'd urn nor animated bust;"
This simple stone directs old Scotia's way,
To pour her sorrows o'er her Poet's dust.

She mourns, sweet, tuneful youth, thy hapless fate,
Tho' all the powers of Song thy fancy fir'd;
Yet Luxury and Wealth lay by in State;
And thankless starved what they so much admir'd.

This humble tribute with a tear he gives;
A brother Bard, he can no more bestow;
But dear to fame thy Song immortal lives,
A nobler monument than Art can show.'

On the stone itself st. 1 l. 1 reads 'No sculptur'd marble,' and l. 3 'pale' for 'old.'[1]

[1] Because long subsequent, the opening stanza is found on Allan Ramsay's stone, Burns's authorship has been hastily questioned. The MS. puts it beyond dispute.

Another kindred poetic tribute which was discovered by Dr. Robert Chambers on a fly-leaf of an odd volume of the *World* is as follows :—

'Ill-fated genius ! heaven-taught Fergusson !
What heart that feels and will not yield a tear
To think life's sun did set ere well begun
To shed its influence on thy bright career ?
Oh ! why should truest worth and genius pine,
Beneath the iron grasp of want and woe !
While titled knaves and idiot greatness shine
In all the splendour Fortune can bestow.

With finer touch another verse-tribute is wrought into the 'Epistle to W. Simson'—

'My senses wad be in a creel[1]
Should I but dare a hope to speel
Wi' Allan, or wi' Gilbertfiel,[2]
The braes o' fame ;
Or Fergusson, the Writer chiel—
A deathless name.

O Fergusson ! thy glorious parts
Ill suited Law's dry, musty arts !
My curse upon your whinstane hearts,
Ye Embrugh gentry !
The tythe o' what ye waste at Cartes
Wad stow'd his pantry.'

Finally—there are the unaffectedly sincere words of the preface to the Kilmarnock vol. of 1786 :—

'To the genius of a Ramsay, or the glorious dawnings of the poor, unfortunate Fergusson, he with equal unaffected sincerity declares, that even in his highest pulse of vanity, he has not the most distant pretensions. These two justly admired Scottish poets he has often had in his eye in the following pieces ; but rather with a view to kindle at their flame, than for servile imitation.'

Perhaps a more affecting proof than any of all these, of the hold, as with 'hooks of steel' his young forerunner had upon Burns, is his quoting of a couplet from one of his English posthumous poems, within a few weeks of his death. It goes poignantly to one's heart even at this late day (April 1796 to George Thomson) :—

[1] As much captured as a fish in the creel or basket.
[2] William Hamilton.

'I close my eyes in misery and open them without hope. I look on the vernal day and say with poor Fergusson—

> "Say, wherefore has an all-indulgent Heaven
> Light to the comfortless and wretched given?"'

II. William Wordsworth.

Not very long before his decease, the venerable and illustrious Poet thus wrote me :—

'My dear Sir,—Both Ramsay and Fergusson are worthy of the labour you are bestowing upon them, and have received their respective tributes of applause from the highest authority, that of Robert Burns. You remember the passage—

> "Come forward, honest Allan,
> The teeth o' Time may gnaw Tantallan,
> But thou's forever;"

and that other—

> "Ramsay and famous Fergusson
> Gied Forth and Tay a lift aboon."

So that you see there is no call for any attempt from me to do honour to either of these distinguished writers.—Heartily wishing you success in your patriotic and laudable undertaking, I remain, my dear sir, faithfully yours, Wm. Wordsworth.'

Again—

'You are right in supposing me to be well acquainted with Fergusson's Poems. His early death was a great loss to the Poetry of Scotland, and would have been a still greater had he not been followed by his mighty successor, Robert Burns, who as a Poet was greatly indebted to his predecessor' (Fergusson's *Life and Works*, 1851, pp. cxliii–iv, but now from the MSS in full).

It was through reading Burns's fervent acknowledgment of his indebtedness to him, that Wordsworth—as he further informed me—was led to seek out a copy of Fergusson's Poems (Morison of Perth's, 1788–89). So that Fergusson shares the glory with Burns of the most heartfelt tribute ever paid to any poet by Wordsworth — always chary of his praise.

> 'I mourned with thousands, but as one
> More deeply grieved; for he was gone
> Whose light I hailed when first it shone
> And showed my youth,
> How verse may build a princely throne
> On humble truth.'

III. Thomas Carlyle.

Elsewhere I shall be compelled to criticise hasty words on Ramsay and Fergusson of this greatest of recent Scots: all the more pleasure, therefore is it to me to be able to publish a characteristic letter addressed to myself while I was preparing the vol. of 1851:—

'Chelsea, 23 *Nov.*

'Dear Sir,—I am much afraid I shall not be able to assist you by any contribution than that of my good wishes, to your pious enterprise. I have not read Fergusson at all since the time of my boyhood; neither has Ramsay ever in mature years been familiar to me except in parts. Yet I still very vividly remember Fergusson's best pieces, mainly those you mention,—Ode to a Bee, Braid Claith, Hallowfair, Leith Races, The Farmer's Ingle,—and should be very glad indeed to see any real elucidation of them or him if a faithful Editor and Biographer will give us such. Ramsay is farther off, is still more obscure; in fact is becoming very cloudy in some of his features. Much enveloped as most things are apt to be at present in vague traditionary cant and twaddle of all kinds, words, words, words, which even for the utterers of them mean almost nothing! I recommend to you the utmost rigour of accuracy both as to facts and opinions; say nothing that you do not mean (whoever else may mean it) with the whole weight that was given you or attainable by you. Perhaps a good portrait of Ramsay might be obtainable somewhere. The current one is surely other than good. The portrait of his old shop in the High Street, that at least is still to be had; perhaps also at Leadhills the hut where he was born may still be in existence—at all events the site of it is sure to be. Any authentic particular, provided it be authentic and indisputable, is valuable. I should even hope there may be some better portrait of Fergusson procurable than the frightful madhouse one; not a fair representation at all of the poor, high-soaring, deep-falling, gifted, and misguided young man.

'With many wishes for yourself which are not good for much, let me add I have a regard to this matter.—I remain, yours truly,

'T. Carlyle.'

IV. Robert Louis Stevenson.

In his *Edinburgh: Picturesque Notes*, Stevenson repeatedly brings in Fergusson, with passionate laudation. I can only refer thereto (*s.n.*) the more readily because I have been favoured with an exceptionally striking letter from him on Fergusson, which was addressed to Mr. Craibe Angus, Glasgow. It needs to be read *cum grano salis;* for its epithets, especially 'drunken' and 'vicious'

toward himself as well as Fergusson, are much too strong and generalising. But such a tribute cannot be withheld for such blemishes, albeit I shall quote only choice *bits* that directly refer to Fergusson.

After an infinitely touching allusion to his irreversible exile from Scotland, 'its birks and heather and burns,' he thus pays fealty to Fergusson:—

'When your hand is in, will you remember our poor Edinburgh Robin? Burns alone has been just to his promise: follow Burns. He knew best, he knew where to draw fish—from the poor, white-faced, drunken, vicious boy, who raved himself to death in the Edinburgh madhouse. Surely there is more to be gleaned about Fergusson, and surely it is high time the task was set about.

'I may tell you (because your poet is not dead) something of how I feel. We are three Robins, who have touched the Scots lyre this last century. Well, the one is the world's. He did it, he came off; he i for ever; but I, and the other, ah! what bonds we have! Born in the same city; both sickly; both vicious; both pestered—one nearly to madness and one to the madhouse—with a damnatory creed; both seeing the stars and the moon, and wearing shoe-leather on the same ancient stones, under the same pends (=courts), down the same closes, where our common ancestors clashed in their armour, rusty or bright. . . . He died in his acute, painful youth, and left the models of the great things that were to come; and the man who came after outlived his green-sickness, and has faintly tried to parody his finished work.

'If you will collect strays of Robert Fergusson, fish for material, collect any last re-echoing of gossip, command me to do what you prefer—to write the preface, to write the whole if you prefer; anything so that another monument (after Burns's) be set up to my unhappy predecessor, on the causey of Auld Reekie. You will never know, nor will any man, how deep this feeling is. I believe Fergusson lives in me. I do. But "tell it not in Gath." Every man has these fanciful superstitions coming, going but yet enduring; only most men are so wise (or the poet in them so dead) that they keep their follies for themselves.'

Continuing the subject in a subsequent letter, Stevenson pleads for a movement to erect a monument to Fergusson, and sheds bitter tears over his end. He says quaintly—

'A more miserable (=sorrowful) tragedy, the sun never shone upon, or (in consideration of our climate) I should rather say, refused to brighten.'

If the witness of ROBERT BURNS—WILLIAM WORDSWORTH—THOMAS CARLYLE—and ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON do not

win acceptance of our claims—our high but modest claims —for Robert Fergusson, no *apologia* — using the Latin rather than the English form, in recollection of a royal misunderstanding of the term — will do so. To any— English or American or Scottish recalcitrants, I address the pungent reproof and reproach of ALEXANDER WILSON in his 'Laurel Disputed, or the Merits of Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson contrasted'—

> 'Whae'er can thae (o' mae I needna speak)
> Read tenty ower at his ain ingle-cheek,
> And no' find something glowan through his blood,
> That gars his een glower through a siller flood;
> May close the beuk, poor coof! and lift his spoon,
> His heart's as hard's the tackets in his shoon.'
> (*Works*, 1870, i. 20, *of Ramsay*).

Be it further remembered that Sir David Wilkie painted one of his most characteristic panels from 'The Farmer's Ingle,' and that a medallion of Fergusson's head has found a niche in the great Scott Monument in Edinburgh.

CHAPTER II

'AN ELL OF GENEALOGY'—FERGUSSONS AND FORBESES

'Traditional story
Disclosed by the natives of dark Lochnagar.'—BYRON.

HEREDITY, in these Darwin-cum-Huxley days, is so universally accepted a factor of Nature and human nature, that it were uncritical to write any man's life that is held worthy of being written at all, without an endeavour to trace his lines of descent. If this suffice not as a good reason for our intended procedure, let these opening sentences from Andrew Lang's *Life of J. G. Lockhart* be pondered:—

'"Every Scotsman has his pedigree," says Sir Walter in the autobiographic fragment where he traces his own. The interest in our ancestors "without whose life we had not been," may be regarded as a foible, and was made a reproach both to Scott and his biographer. Scott was "anxious to realise his own ancestry to his imagination . . . whatever he had in himself he would fain have made out a hereditary claim for." I think also there is not wanting a domestic piety; and Science since Sir Walter's day has approved of his theory, that the Past of a race revives. For these reasons Scottish readers at least may pardon a genealogical sketch in this place. Or if they be unkind, we may say of Lockhart as he says in the case of Thomas Campbell, "he was a Scotsman, and of course his biographer begins with an ell of genealogy"' (i. p. 1).

This 'ell' is the more necessary in the case of Fergusson, as this same Lockhart has haphazardly misrepresented the origins of both Allan Ramsay and our Poet, putting the matter thus—

'Ramsay and Fergusson were both men of humble condition, the latter of the *meanest*' (*Life of Burns*, 1838, p. 122).

If by 'humble condition' impoverished circumstances only were intended, one might concede it, though it

demands a strenuous protest whenever and wherever the epithet 'mean' or 'meanest' is applied to '*honest* poverty'—Burns's brave word. But Lockhart's argument is blunted unless descent be understood. Therefore I must recall that the supremest of all instances shows that it is unphilosophic to confound outwardly lowly environment with mean or meanest lineage. With reference to Ramsay, he was 'bien,' *i.e.* well-to-do, from almost the outset, and never forgot or allowed others to forget his 'lang descent' from the ennobled Dalhousie Ramsays and maternally from the bluest of blue Scottish blood, the Douglases. But his link with them was shadowy—though, as with Edmund Spenser and the Althorp Spencers, his claim was graciously and pleasantly admitted — compared with the 'good birth' of Robert Fergusson, as shall speedily appear.

Of the Fergussons and Fergusons, two living capable scholars and genealogists — James Ferguson, Esq., of Kinmundy, Advocate, Edinburgh, and the Rev. Robert Menzies Fergusson, M.A., of Logie — have published a monumental History and Biography in a goodly tome—not as too frequently in such books, a tomb—of considerably over six hundred closely-packed pages, in the following work—*Records of the Clan and Name of Fergusson, Ferguson, and Fergus.* Edited for the Clan Fergus[s]on Society. . . . Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1895. Thither, I must refer all who wish to be fully informed on the many 'fair ladies and brave men' of the name of Fergusson distributed over '*broad* Scotland'—so similarly the Jew imaginatively and idealisingly spoke of the least of all Lands.

It were a hard task to so much as attempt to disentangle what Sir Walter calls 'the inextricable filaments of Scottish family relationship' of the manifold lines of the Fergussons, so as to relate our Poet with the much-marrying and intermarrying cadets of the 'Clan.' Having had the good fortune to have ascertained the birthplace of his father, I feel free to decline the over-task, and to limit myself to a single parish and district in the far North, viz. Tarland, or as it is more widely named, Cromar — that Cromar which fills so large a space in Scottish history from the

days of Robert Bruce on to the tumults of the Highland Clans, and forward to '15 and '45—as has been picturesquely and memorably told in *Deeside Tales; or, Sketches of Men and Manners among the Peasantry of Upper Deeside since* 1745 (1872).

It was known before, and was stated accordingly in my 1851 *Life of Fergusson*, that his great-grandfather on his father's side was a clergyman of the Kirk of Scotland—the fact having been derived by all his early biographers from his family. But it was reserved to the too modest anonymous author (Rev. J. G. Michie, M.A., Dinnet) in the *Deeside Tales* to verify and localise the fact. I have also had the advantage of his more recent researches.

There was only one known family of the name of Fergusson within the parish of Cromar. This family possessed the estate therein of Auchtererne (Watererne) from the reign of David II. to that of James V., when it would seem that they ceased to be landed proprietors. The long-carried tradition is, that the last proprietor of Auchtererne was father of the Rev. Alexander Fergusson,—contracted by a local usage that still prevails into Ferris, *not* Gaelic for Fergusson, as the historians of the 'Clan' supposed,—who became ultimately minister of the parish of Crathie. He, having been of the Auchtererne house, takes us back to Tarland or Cromar. Unfortunately, the Parish Register of the period has disappeared, or rather it never existed, if the account in Sir John Sinclair's *Statistical Account* is to be depended upon; for there we read as follows:—

> 'With regard to the population of the parishes, no distinct account can be given, as no register of births, deaths, or marriages has ever been or can be exactly kept in them, owing to the distance of several parts of the shire from the minister's residence' (vi. 227).

It is consequently out of our power to give birth or burial entries of the Fergussons of Tarland. But from other semi-accidentally preserved documents, we are not left wholly without a clue. There having been only the one family of Fergussons within the parish, it follows that these data belong to them. When the Rev. Alexander Fergusson migrated to Crathie, a son of his named William Fergusson remained in Cromar, and a jet of light is cast

on him by this circumstance, that he appears as a Wadsetter on the lands of the 'Laird' of Skene, near Tarland. His name also occurs in a rental receipt-book which had belonged to a family of the name of Esson, who had at one time been tenants of the land of Skene.

A 'wadset,' as defined in Bell's *Law Dictionary* (*s.v.*), is a conveyance of land in pledge, and is somewhat analogous to a mortgage, but in process of time a wadset assumed the form of a more absolute conveyance. William Fergusson must therefore have had—like his father, as we shall see anon—considerable spare monies. This William Fergusson had a son—Christian name unhappily not known—and *he* was father of William Fergusson, father of Robert Fergusson. By the burial-entry of our Poet's father—to be adduced in its place—we learn that he was born in Tarland, in 1714. The probabilities are that he was a younger or the youngest son of a numerous family — judging by his straitened circumstances and enforced early earning of his 'daily bread.'

Having thus ascertained the paternal family-tree, and discovered the traditional clerical great-grandfather, it is interesting at this late day to glean such slight notices as survive of him.

Apart from present-day associations, and Her Majesty's leal-hearted adherence to our national Presbyterianism while resident within the parish, Crathie has a story worthy of fuller telling than I can afford. For in post-Reformation times its 'Manse' became a centre of culture and enlightenment in these remote and extensive regions of the Highlands.

The settlement of the Rev. Alexander Fergusson as minister of Crathie is our first outstanding and fully-assured fact. That 'settlement' took place 'about 1630'; the exact date has not been traced. By all the well-preserved traditions of the district, it introduced a new era of social intercourse between the clergy and the laity, his own social position as son of the proprietor of Auchtererne making him equal with the gentry. He had married Christian Auchterlony, a local family-name of mark down to our own day.

The incumbency of the Rev. Alexander Fergusson

(1630?—1668–70?) was eventful, but cannot have been always pleasant to those who lived through it. He all along appears as a man of 'substance'; *e.g.* in the Miscellany of the Spalding Club (vol. iii. p. 138), from the 'Book of the Annualrentaris and Wadsetters' (1633), we read of various considerable loans. Onward the same Miscellany presents him as still a prosperous man. This continued for fully seven years, during which the same record shows he must have exercised much influence for good in and beyond his parish, as a man of affairs. But evil times were at hand. The Civil War broke out. The district was divided in its politics. The minister was necessarily a Covenanter, and suffered severely at the hands of the opposite party, who were the more numerous, and notoriously rapacious. His own means had been largely invested mostly in the hands of Lowland proprietors, but he had also formed financial relations with many of the small 'lairds' around him, whose ruin in the strife had pressed hard upon him. An event, however, connected him most intimately with one of the parties, viz. the marriage of his daughter Agnes to James Farquharson of Inverey—the head of a powerful sept of his 'Clan.' Farquharson was a Protestant, and like the great Montrose, at first a Covenanter. While this continued, the minister had in his son-in-law a powerful protector; but the case was altered when Montrose became a Royalist and Inverey joined his unfurled standard. The good clergyman's 'goods and chattels' now became the prey of the bands of Highlanders that scoured the country, and his losses were heavy. For the reparation of these he was recommended to Parliament 30th July 1649, and such was the strength of his case and the influence of his friends that an Act was passed in his favour the following day, and continued 21st October 1652—*not* 1662, as stated in Dr. Hew Scott's *Fasti Ecclesiæ Scoticanæ* (*s.n.*). He survived the Restoration several years; and, though singularly enough the exact date of his death is apparently nowhere recorded, it probably occurred about 1670, as in the following year his widow makes attestation of his estate.

Having thus recounted the facts of Robert Fergusson's paternal descent, I hold it as in the last degree interesting to be able to link him with a minister of the gospel and so com-

manding a type of man. I value the relationship much more than the mere '*gentle*' blood of the house of Auchtererne. I regard it as something higher than merely titular rank, primary or collateral through the Farquharsons. Nor can I leave it unreckoned in thinking-out the elements that went to shape and colour the sadly-mingled life of the great-grandson of the minister of Crathie.[1]

Maternally, Fergusson's descent was at least equal to his paternal. I have been favoured with abundant genealogical MSS. bearing on this. From the mass, I select a paper headed 'Descent from John Forbes, 3rd son of Walter Forbes, 9th laird of Tolquhon and Thanistone, by Jane, sister of the present Lord Forbes of Pitsligo, whom he married in 1627.'

The John Forbes who heads this document stood for a time, through the predecease of his immediate elder brother, Thomas Forbes of Anchry, Advocate, Edinburgh, heir-presumptive to the estate. But this prospective succession was cut off by his eldest brother, Sir Alexander Forbes, marrying and having a family. John Forbes resided at Edinbanchory, near the site of the House of Bruce, in the parish of Auchendeir. He followed no profession, but lived as 'an old Scottish gentleman all of the olden time.' He was enabled to do so from his father having left him a life-annuity—apparently a generous one—from the estate of Tolquhon. He married—*circa* 1640—Margaret Duguid, daughter of the laird of Auchinhove in the parish of Lumphanan—not far from where Macbeth was slain (*Statistical Account*). By her he had an only son, Duncan, who is designated of 'Little Kildrummie.' This Duncan Forbes emerges in the 'List of the Pollable Persons within the Shire of Aberdeen, 1696' (2 vols. 4to, 1844, i. 497, 499). He rented the farms of Templeton, Hillockhead, and Wellhead of Kildrummy. He married on 31st December 1668 Jeane Glasse—of whom nothing has been transmitted. He died on 14th April 1701.

Duncan Forbes was succeeded by his son John, who entered on all his father's farms. This John Forbes had

[1] Murdoch M'Lennan, author of the racy song of Sheriffmuir, 'They ran and we ran,' was also minister of Crathie, and Adam Fergusson, M.A., father of the Professor; and there are other names of mark.

three sons and four daughters. We are concerned only with two—a son John, born 24th January 1680; a daughter Sophia, born 10th April 1675.

So far this MS. is in agreement with other family papers, but it goes on to state an impossible marriage of the paternal John Forbes, as follows: 'He married Sophia Ker, *daughter* of Andrew Ker, minister of Rathen in Morayshire.'

I call this an impossible marriage, because we find from the *Fasti Ecclesiæ Scoticanæ* (*s.n.*) that the Rev. Andrew Ker, M.A., of Rathen, was only born in 1680, and so could not possibly have had a marriageable daughter at the date. It is a simple slip of memory, or of the scribe's pen. Sophia Ker was a *sister*, not daughter, of the Rev. Andrew Ker of Rathen, and both were the children of Alexander Ker, 'gentleman' and 'tenant' of Drumnahoove, which it may be noted immediately adjoins Templeton. This Alexander Ker, again, was son, or possibly grandson, of the Rev. Andrew Ker, or Car, minister of Glenbucket. An entry in the Pollbook of 1696 concerning this Alexander Ker, thus runs: 'Alexander Ker, tennant ther and Anna Gordon his spouse: Alexander, James, and Arthur Ker, his sons: *Sophia*, Elizabeth, and Margaret, his daughters.'

We are thus led up to a clerical descent of Robert Fergusson maternally as well as paternally. Both great-grandfathers were clergymen of the Kirk of Scotland.

Andrew Ker, minister of Rathen and Glenbucket, and Alexander Fergusson of Crathie were contemporary. It is also noteworthy that the fortunes and misfortunes of the two families were very similar.

Sophia Ker, then, daughter of Alexander Ker 'gentleman,' married John Forbes 'gentleman' of Templeton Kildrummy, in 1704.

The farm-steading of Templeton, in which John Forbes and Sophia Ker resided, was burnt to the ground—whether by accident or design was never fully ascertained—in 1717, with all that it contained, including of course the family muniments—a calamity that, perhaps, explains the foregoing blunder.

John Forbes had by his wife three sons and four daughters, exactly like a before-noticed John Forbes. We

again have only to do with two of these sons and two of the daughters. The two sons were—John, born 9th August 1711; Hary, born 10th May 1716,—the latter is here named because 'Hary'—so spelled—was revived in the Poet's family. The two daughters were—Barbara, born 28th June 1709; Elizabeth, born 6th March 1714,—the former again named because similarly revived, and the latter as the goal of our search. For Elizabeth Forbes became wife of William Fergusson of Tarland, and so mother of Robert Fergusson.

We shall have repeated occasion, unhappily, to return on the one son who survived, John Forbes, brother of Elizabeth, and so maternal uncle of the Poet. Meanwhile I note that the Forbes MSS. inform us that, besides his inherited farms enumerated, he occupied the farm of Forresterhill in the parish of Meldrum, co. of Aberdeen. Not only so, but that he was also 'factor' for Mr. Urquhart of Meldrum and for various other extensive landed proprietors in that district.[1]

Reverting to the Kers, as I have chanced on a very outspoken vernacular song by James Ker, who is believed to have been brother of Sophia Ker, it seems expedient to reproduce it. I came upon it while examining the David Herd MSS. in the British Museum (Additional MSS. 22312, f. 20).

[1] I place here these further details concerning John Forbes. His first wife was Jane or Jean Dalrymple, a ward of the then Lord Findlater; and after her death, without leaving a family, he married, secondly, Isabella, daughter of Bailie James Simpson, younger of Little Folla and merchant in Old Meldrum. By this marriage he had six sons and five daughters; but it needs not that we occupy much-needed space with their names, save that it may be recalled that a daughter Jean—born 4th October 1772—married John Nichol, merchant and farmer, Huntly Hill, by whom she had a family, and among them John Nichol, LL.D., Professor of Astronomy in the University of Glasgow, and father of his still more brilliant son, Professor John Nichol. I cannot withhold adding that the 'greatly beloved' and richly dowered Professor Edward Forbes was of the family of Forbes of Fenzies, through another son, who because of Rebellion entanglements fugitively migrated to the Isle of Man (*Life of Edward Forbes*, by Wilson and Geikie). These data on John Forbes have been mainly drawn from family MSS., and from information communicated by the late Mr. Keith Forbes, Solicitor, Peterhead.

SONG WROTE BY MR. JAMES KERR OF KILDRUMMY ON BEING DESIRED TO MARRY A RICH OLD WOMAN.

Tune, '*Tweedside.*'

'My father wad hae me to wed
A woman decrepit and old;
They'll come nane like her to my bed,
Though she had a tun fu' o' gold.

I value nae riches at a';
There's ae thing I look to above;
Although my poor fortune be sma',
Yet I'll hae the lassie I love.

A' sordid low ends I do hate;
True love maun be free and unforc'd;
Though poverty should be my fate,
I'll ne'er frae my choice be divorc'd.'

Another Kerr or Carr figures in a snatch of song that the Rev. Andrew Christie remembers his mother singing as a cradle lullaby—

'Hey my Andrew Carr!
Hey my Andrew Carr!
What care I for a' the warld
Gin I hae Andro Carr?'

An inevitable suggestion from these two songs is that Robert Fergusson as a Poet owed something besides his clerical heritage to his paternal and maternal kin. There are these Kers, and his own father is known to have indulged himself in his early years in writing satirical and humorous poems on local characters, though Bishop Gleig in Supplement of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* tells us that 'wiser than his son,' he gave up the indulgence! Poor bishop!

Sufficient has been furnished to demonstrate that the blood of Robert Fergusson was very far from being 'mean,' much less, in Lockhart's phrase, 'of the meanest.' Nor is it mere fancy that we shall find traits of character, of temperament, of conduct, and even correspondency of circumstance coming to him from his ancestry. He was well-born, *e.g.*, compared with Robert Burns.

CHAPTER III

PARENTAGE—BIRTH—BIRTHPLACE—CHILDHOOD

'Frae Corgarf to Craigievar;
The royal burgh of Aberdene.'
Battle of Harlaw.

'Poortith cauld.'—BURNS.

WE have seen that William Fergusson of Tarland married Elizabeth Forbes, youngest daughter of John Forbes and Sophia Ker his wife (c. ii.). As a younger son of the son of the 'Wadsetter' of the lands of Skene, we have also seen he must have been socially on an equality with his wife's family. But the fact that he was a younger son holds in it the secret of two things: first, that he had to be 'bound apprentice' to a merchant in Aberdeen—a fact stated by all his son's biographers; second, that he appears to have been straitened in his worldly circumstances throughout. Both husband and wife were in their twenty-seventh year—an age which in the fair sex was riskily near the 'old maid,' what her sisters came to be.

It will be found in the sequel, in relation to the most pathetic incident in our Poet's career, that almost certainly the 'merchant' to whom he is said to have been 'bound' was Dean of Guild Burnett; and that by 'merchant' we are to understand an exporter and importer of goods of the most miscellaneous character, William Fergusson's function being 'clerking.' His beautiful handwriting—various examples of which I have seen—and his mathematical-arithmetical qualifications and likings, attest that he had received a sound education, as education then was.

Hugh Miller, in his *Scottish Merchant of the Eighteenth Century*, gives vivid insight into the 'merchanting' of the type wherein William Fergusson was engaged, and prepares

us for the readiness and ease with which he afterwards entered on any opening that offered. He must have been emphatically a 'handy' man.

The date of this marriage can only be approximately arrived at, viz. 1741. I fix on 1741, because their first-born child, Hary,—afterwards a fine-hearted, adventurous fellow and a capital letter-writer, as may be seen in my vol. of 1851,—was born in 1742. Barbara, a second daughter, was born in 1744; John—a third family name maternally—born in 1746, died in infancy. From an Inverarity Memorandum, I learn these three were born 'near Tarland.'

When William Fergusson first came to Aberdeen is not known, but it seems manifest that as in 1741 he was—as above—in his twenty-seventh year, he must long prior to his marriage have passed from apprenticeship and been installed as full 'clerk.'

'About 1746' is the somewhat loose year-date assigned to the surcease of his employment with the Aberdeen 'merchant' (called 'tradesman' by Alexander Chalmers, *s.n. Biog. Dict.*). That ending has been assigned to the fulfilment of his 'bond' of apprenticeship; but I think I am right in stating that it was not so. Dean of Guild Burnett died in 1748; and, as William Fergusson's migration to Edinburgh is always said by his son's biographers to have been caused by the death of his employer, the probabilities are that his permanent removal at anyrate belonged to 1748, rather than to 'about 1746.'

Be all this as it may, William Fergusson and his family migrated to Edinburgh.

He had only been in the capital three days when, from the excellent 'character' which he brought with him from the North, he obtained employment as 'clerk' with Mr. Robert Baillie, who was then the only 'haberdasher' in all Edinburgh! Significantly, however, he was not engaged, remarks Alexander Campbell, '*without the precaution of security having been given that he was of good principles*' (*Introduction to History of Scottish Poetry*, p. 289).

The period (1746–48) reminds us that the Rebellion of '45 took a while to ebb, and even in ebbing left a swell liable to burst.

There would be no difficulty in this instance; as, like the

minister of Crathie, his grandfather, William Fergusson was too level-headed a man to have been led away by the *ignis fatuus* glamour of 'bonnie Prince Charlie.' He had adhered to the *not* 'bonnie' House of Hanover.

The Mr. Baillie with whom our Poet's father found speedy employment was a noticeable man and citizen of Edinburgh in his day. This, however, is hardly the place to chronicle his chequered story. Proof upon proof of his financial troubles have been before me in a multitude of bonds granted by him 'for execution.' I refer to these, because the whole are in William Fergusson's handwriting and witnessed by him.

His 'clerk,' I fear, would speedily share and suffer from Mr. Baillie's altered circumstances. But one fact it is important to put in the forefront and accentuate, viz. that William Fergusson remained 'clerk' with Mr. Baillie up to 18th December 1754 at least. Amongst the deeds already mentioned in his handwriting are certain of 1754 (as earlier) wherein he is still designated his 'clerk.'

From 'about 1746' or '1748,' then, William Fergusson was 'clerk' and book-keeper—self-evidently most confidential—to Mr. Robert Baillie. It was a very humble and poorly-paid situation that was thus obtained and retained. Only such a 'managing' housewife and mother as all accounts agree Elizabeth Fergusson was, could have kept the wolf Poverty from their door.

In the outset, the household consisted of husband and wife and—as we saw—three little children, all to be fed and clad.

Their lowly roof-tree was a '*small old house, much smaller than the rest*,' in the Cap-and-Feather Close. This was a confined alley, but memorable in the story of the

'Grey metropolis of the North.'[1]

The Cap-and-Feather Close stood immediately above the present Halkerston's Wynd. There, on 5th September 1750, Robert Fergusson was born. This I am enabled,

[1] Tennyson robbed Stirling of 'grey' that Sir Walter had given it. '*Grey* Stirling with her towers and town' (*Lady of the Lake*, v. xviii.), and displaced his designation of Edinburgh as '*Empress* of the North' (Intr. *Marmion*, c. v.).

for the first time, to make absolutely certain by his baptismal entry in the Canongate Parish Register—an entry that perfunctory officials deprived all former biographers of, but which the Rev. Walter Macleod, M.A., of the Register House, recovered for me, as follows :—

'1750. Sept. 5. To William Fergusson, clerk to bailie Robert Baillie, merchant in the N. K. P., and Elizabeth Forbes his spouse, a son named Robert: born same day.'

The exceptionally speedy baptism suggests delicacy of the infant, as in the case of great Dr. Samuel Johnson, who, it will be remembered, was born and baptized on the same day.

This entry clears away, once for all, the erroneous year-date 1751, from Burns's memorial-stone inscription onward.

'There are,' says Lord Jeffrey of himself, 'very few persons the precise spot of whose nativity it is worth while taking much pains to fix' (*Life by Lord Cockburn*, i. 1).

I venture to assume that Robert Fergusson is of the 'very few' for whom the claim may be made. Therefore, I gladly avail myself of Sir Daniel Wilson's sympathetic and painstaking description of the spot :—

'To the East . . . the first step in the great undertaking of building the North Bridge, demolished some of the old "lands" of the High Street, and among the rest, the Cap-and-Feather Close, a short alley which stood immediately above Halkerston's Wynd. The "lands" that formed the east side of this close still remain in North Bridge Street, presenting doubtless to the eye of every tasteful reformer offensive blemishes in the modern thoroughfare ; yet this unpicturesque locality has peculiar claims on the interest of every lover of Scottish poetry ; for here on the 5th September 1750, the gifted child of genius, Robert Fergusson, was born. The precise site of his father's dwelling is unknown, but now that it has been transformed by the indiscriminating hands of modern improvers, this description may suffice to suggest to some, as they pass along that crowded thoroughfare, such thoughts as the dwellers in cities are most careless to encourage.'

There is an additional footnote—

'In Edgar's map, the close is shown extending no farther than in a line with Milne's Court, so that the whole of the east side still remains, including, it may be, the poet's birthplace' (*Memorials of Edinburgh in the Olden Time*, ii. 22).

The Cap-and-Feather Close was a malodorous birthplace. Nevertheless, in 1750 onward through another decade and

longer, there were to be seen in the close and neighbourhood high-titled ladies and their lords.

The narrow circumstances of the family, from 1746–48 forward, were not lightened in 1750 when Robert, after an interval of four or five years, added a fourth mouth.

A letter from William Fergusson to his brother-in-law, which it was our rare luck to recover along with others equally important in our vol. of 1851, yields us several noticeable facts. As at this long after-day revealing the interior economy (in a double sense) of the 'small old house' in the Cap-and-Feather Close, this letter is of the deepest interest. I make room for it in full, and simply note that the spelling of certain words is that of the period :—

WILLIAM FERGUSSON TO MR JOHN FORBES OF ROUNDLICHNOT.

'EDINBURGH, 19*th December* 1751.

'SIR,—Your favours of 15th I duly received and am glade thereby to learn that you and Mrs. Forbes are well. You take no notice which of the two ways I proposed was most convenient with respect to reimbursing you for value of the meall. Meantime your correspondent at Aberdeen may be advised to cask yr about 3 bolls newest miln'd meall. Ship it on board the first boat from that place for Lieth [Leith], marked "R. Baillie, Edinburgh," by which it will be brought to Edinburgh at sight, and give me an opportunity of paying freight, shore-dues, and cartage myself, and upon sight of price of meall, cask, couperage, shipping, &c., shall order your money in the way seems most agreeable.

'As to my situation, it is same as formerly, and can't propose to make any advance on my wages, with my present master. It's not impossible to find more encouragement in the place, but my loss is want either of interest [influence] or acquaintances to recommend me; and had I not continued my family in the country until I furnished a room and saved £9 over, I could not [have] had subsistence, as you'll see by an abstract of last year's expences.

'I have sometimes some shillings when I pay money away to persons on my master's account. Writes at spare hours to some acquaintances, for which gets complements, either a cheese, a ham, a cap or frock to some of the little ones; and particularly I have the charge of posting up a dealer's books, which can be expede in six of my spare hours in the week, for which I have 40s. sterling yearly: last summer, in the mornings, I wrote eight quire of papper at a penny a page, for which I'm to get £3, 4s.

'My wife joins in her love to you, Mrs. Forbes, and sister when you see her. Rob, the young one, is a thriving boy. Harry is well-advanced in his Latine, exponing Ovid, M. and C. Nepos. Babie [=Barbara] has been tender of late, but now thought better.

'However much you have reason to think I have been on the

ceremony in not writing so oft as you might have expected, believe me no emergency happening in the course of my situation made me the more easy. Shall be glade to know if I could in the least be usefull to you here, or if [you] had ever any business in the place that might fall under my care, the same should be negotiat with all expedition.

'Grain is now on the falling here, having last Friday sold 20d. p. boll cheaper at Haddington than day before. Meall sold here last week at 12d. and 11½d. p. peck: sells this week at 11d.—I am, Sir, your affᵉ. brother, and most hubˡ. servᵗ.,

'WILL. FERGUSSON.

'ABSTRACT OF EXPENCES, ANNO 1751.

House rent	£1	10	0
Coals	2	12	0
Candles	0	19	6
Bread	4	6	8
Milk	2	4	5
Flesh and fish	3	6	2½
Salt, greens, and barley	0	8	8
* * * [torn away with wafer]	1	10	4
Washing	0	13	0
Quarter-payments for children, etc.	1	15	0
	£19	5	9½

'*N.B.*—4s. 2½d. and chance for shoes, shirts, clothes, &c.'

Though William and Elizabeth Fergusson's children were thus of the Poor, the 'tenty' reader of the foregoing letter will have taken note of an especially Scottish, and especially creditable Scottish, characteristic, viz. that their parents, out of their little income, contrived to provide for the early and thorough education of their children, girls as well as boys. In the light, or rather shadow of such an 'abstract of expences' as reveals a sum total of annual income under £20, it makes one justly proud of one's country and countrymen to read of the eldest boy, then in his ninth year—'Harry is well advanced in his Latin,' and actually 5s. more than a year's rent of their home being paid out in 'quarter-payments for children.'

It ever has been the glory of Scotland that her humblest peasantry and 'common people'—name of honour—equally with the higher, have valued the John Knox-established Parish Schools and '*ettled*' at something beyond them for their children.

One is pleased to learn incidentally from the home-letter

that the family had been in the 'country.' Perhaps this accounts for the good report of 'Rob' the 'young one' being still in 1751 '*a thriving boy*.' The thriving proved to be shortlived.

In the considerable 'laying in' of 'newest miln'd meall' we have a key to the Poet's after-praise of the national staff of life, oatmeal, in his 'Farmer's Ingle.' Robert Fergusson's heart, as did Burns's, went into his panegyric. But, before going from this point of our Poet's youthful nurture on '*parritch, chief o' Scotia's food*,' I must reassert its value as food. Nor can I better do this than through the inestimable *Law Lyrics*, where its praises are sung in such sort as should have gladdened the two Roberts—

> 'For makin' flesh an' buildin' banes
> There ne'er was siccan food for weans;
> It knits their muscles steeve as stanes,
> An' teuch as brasses;
> Fills hooses fu' o' boys wi' brains
> An' rosy lasses.'

That on 19th December 1751, or about a year and three months after his birth, Fergusson was a 'thriving boy' adds pathos to the all-too-soon further glimpse we get of him as '*extremely delicate*' through his after-infancy. Alexander Campbell, Dr. David Irving, and Thomas Sommers unite in stating that he was '*of a remarkably delicate constitution*'; and, '*while under the influence of infantile diseases, very frequently in a very weakly state*,'—a circumstance (observes the first) that '*peculiarly endeared him to his mother*.' Be it recalled that Stevenson found kinship with Fergusson herein.

In 1754—Robert's fourth year, and when another had been added, Margaret, in 1753—William Fergusson was over-persuaded to leave the service of Mr. Robert Baillie, by a promise of increased emolument made him by a Mr. Hope of Midhope, some distance from Edinburgh. This must have been in the closing weeks of December 1754, as shown by the deed before referred to. The change was an unfortunate one. A second letter from our priceless Inverarity collection, which was likewise addressed to his brother-in-law, makes it clear that the removal to Midhope was calamitous, and indicates sorrowfully to us a continuous

hard struggle for bare subsistence—much again as Robert Burns's father had to make almost contemporaneously. This letter will speak for itself, and needs to be heard:—

WILLIAM FERGUSSON TO MR. JOHN FORBES OF ROUNDLICHNOT.

'MIDHOPE, *17th February* 1755.

'DEAR BROTHER,—After receipt of yours of 16th December last, I went in to Edinburgh in consequence of a bargain with Mr. Hope, and was a fortnight extremely busy in settling accounts for and with Mr. Baillie, and we parted exceeding good friends; and ever since my return here, have been exceedingly hurried, otherways I would have wrote you ere now.

'As to Mr. Hope's business, I'm determined to have nothing to do with either him or it either, after Martinmas. I wish it may be in my power to stay till then: last half-year he chang'd no less than six clerks. He is a most insulting tyrant. In short, he is quite destitute of the most, if not all the social virtues; and altho' the neighbourhood all agree that he behaves with more decency to me than any he ever had before, yet he is so implacable in every respect, that I'm weary of my life, and will be unhappy until the expiration of our term.

'The gentlewoman that recommended me to Lady Mary Deskford is Miss Billy Fraser, Milliner in Edinburgh, who I suppose is a niece of the late Collonell Ogilvie's. I make no doubt but you'll take the opportunity if you find it favourable when Lord Deskford is in the North, as I also hope Mr. Morison will do, to speak [to] his Lordship on my account, as this place is intollerable, and that my family requires my being in constant business. You may be sure that had this place been any way agreeable, I would not have hesitate about settling my family in this countrey; but it is better they stay in Edinburgh, as I hope to be with them myself nine months hence, if spared.

'You certainly have interpret my last wrong, when you write that I talk'd lightly of £25. I know the value of money better than that; and shall use all possible means to keep myself in some business or other, altho' the present has but a dire aspect. Shall be glade to hear more frequently from you now while under this so arbitrary jurisdiction, because to hear of friends' welfare will contribute much to lighten the burden. Complements to Mrs. Forbes and Sister.—I am, dear Brother, your most affectionate brother and humble servant,

'WILL. FERGUSSON.'

The 'Mr. Hope' of Midhope, which neighbours Hopetoun House, here referred to, is known to have been of the worst type of convivial 'lairds,' though a scion of the noble Hopetoun family. I could adduce a good deal to confirm William Fergusson's bitter description of him; but I have elected not to revive his unsavoury memory. I simply recall his name—Archibald Hope of Rankeillor, son of Sir Thomas Hope, Bart., of Craighall.

One can still feel how gloom must have settled down over Midhope and the 'little old house' in the Cap-and-Feather Close under so 'arbitrary jurisdiction,' as doors of hoped-for opportunity closed with a clang. The nine months' continuance enforcedly at Midhope must have been extremely trying for this good man, and equally wearying and wearing for the wife and mother in Edinburgh.

William Fergusson left Mr. Hope, as anticipated, at Martinmas 1755. But he was not—as has been said—'thrown upon the world.' Fortunately, a company of upholsterers—Messrs. Wardrope & Peat—of Carrubber's Close, Edinburgh, who required an experienced accountant, had applied to him. Evidently they had done so while he was still at Midhope, so that the earlier biographers were mistaken. The truth is that save in the matter of wages or income, Mr. Fergusson was never of the poorest, or out of employment.

Then even as to the £20 and £25 per annum, it must be kept in recollection that Scotland in general, and Edinburgh in particular, were without 'openings' such as now abound. It is almost grotesque to read up the statistics of trade and commerce of the period, and of the narrowness of professional, legal, educational, and clerical incomes. So that William Fergusson's was really no exceptional case. It took Scotland well-nigh a century to recover from the national losses by the Union, with English taxation—malt and salt taxes, being purely English—thence-forward transferred to it, and fully the same term of years to overcome the destruction of her then chief industries, and the loss of the Parliament and Court, and to enter on her subsequent splendid agricultural, manufacturing, and commercial enterprises that have placed her abreast of England.

Another determining factor must not be lost sight of—that William Fergusson was a man of principle, of old-fashioned rectitude, and who would not fall in with 'shady' ways of earning a living.

A fourth letter, which will also be found in my 1851 volume, like the other addressed to his brother-in-law, who was then 'factor' on the estate of Meldrum, describes with much modesty, and not without touches of wistfulness, his

arduous and poorly recompensed duties, his prospects and anxieties. I can here quote only one sentence: 'My wife has had a web for several months on the stocks, which I hope will soon be ready for launching.'

The picture of 'thrift industrious' of 'Grannie' in 'The Farmer's Ingle' held recollections of home in the Poet.

We must not think only of the smallness or poorness of Robert Fergusson's childhood and boyhood's home. It *was* a home, not a house merely. And, to the honour of such lowly homes, let it never be forgotten that the testimony of John Murdoch concerning the if possible still humbler dwelling of the Burnses thus ran—

'In this mean cottage of which I was at times an inhabitant, I really believe there dwelt a larger portion of content than in any palace in Europe' (HAMILTON PAUL'S *Burns*, p. 7).

But all this notwithstanding, I shall be constrained later to return on John Forbes, Esq., of Templeton, Wellhead, Kildrummy, Forrester-hill, and four factorships, and take up a parable and with Robert Burns almost 'curse the whinstane heart' that so failed in duty to a sister, and such a sister.

William Fergusson had pleaded again for Lord Deskford's 'interest,' in order to secure for him some post in the 'Customs,' 'anything above a tidesman.' Nothing came of it. But this letter had only been despatched a few days when he obtained a much more congenial, though not greatly more remunerative, situation as 'clerk' with a namesake and a distant relative—Walter Fergusson, Esq., Writer, Edinburgh. Henceforward he described himself, and was described by his employer, and others, as a 'Writer.'

This usage demands a word of explanation. The term 'Writer' never has had any precise legal signification. It seems to have come into use in Scotland after the Reformation, very much to express the legal variety of 'clerk' in a lawyer's office. In 16th and 17th century writs it is often found applied to men who were in the employment of another person, and the appropriation of it to those in legal business on their own account must have been gradual. Everyone knows 'Gibbie Glossin the Writer' in *Guy Mannering*, and the scorn for him of Scott the 'advocate.'

The clerkship with Walter Fergusson was held for upwards of six years, and by another fortunate find by J. Maitland Thomson, Esq., M.A., Advocate, Edinburgh, I am enabled to give here the closing clause of a deed, as follows, written by William Fergusson :—

'In Witness whereof WE have subscribed these Presents Written by William Fergusson Writer in Edinburgh At Edinburgh the Fifth day of March Seventeen hundred and Sixty three Years. In presence of these Witnesses Mr. Anthony Fergusson Merchant in Edinburgh and the said William Fergusson. Wa: Ferguson. Jas. Walker.
Anthony Ferguson Witness.
Will: Fergusson Witness.

I am glad to have it in my power to place here a careful facsimile of William Fergusson's autograph, to show his educated and fine 'Roman hand.'

CHAPTER IV

SCHOOLING AND SCHOOLS—FAMILY LIGHTS AND SHADOWS—VISIT TO THE NORTH

'Edinburgh!
Your rantin' High Schule yard—
The jib, the lick, the roguish trick.'
LADY NAIRNE (*Fareweel, Edinburgh*).

ROBERT FERGUSSON in 1756, when his father, as we saw in c. iii., passed from Carrubber's Close upholstery wareroom into the service as 'clerk' and 'Writer' of his namesake, Walter Ferguson, Esq., was in his sixth year. His eldest brother, Hary, had been put to school somewhat before that age; and, as his father proudly reported to his brother-in-law, was in his ninth year well advanced in his Latin. His younger brother must follow suit.

Robert was now rather beyond the usual Scottish age for first going to school, solely from early delicacy of health. But he had had the inestimable advantage of having been prepared by his good mother, who taught him his letters and much more besides.

I have seen his first school-book. It was a small penny pamphlet of eight pages. The first page had the alphabet or A B C in large distinct lettering, varied in successive lines. On another page, a few letters were brought together as monosyllables, ab, ba, etc. Then followed, I remember, certain of the Questions and Answers of the Presbyterian Shorter Catechism, which had to be committed to memory. Then again followed a selection from the Book of Proverbs and the Lord's Prayer. I think, too, that Master Robert's copy had a fragment of pellucid horn in the middle, for protection from soiled or sticky forefinger and thumb. I also think that on one page Hary had written his name cross-wise

—showing careful preservation of their school-books for after-comers. Ill-used school-books reveal lacking oversight.

Multitudes of Scots, of this later day, at home and all over our empire, are neither afraid nor ashamed to own their indebtedness to just such teaching and training as I have described. They are shallow people, be they cleric or laic, who sneer and jest at the Shorter Catechism and Confession of Faith of the Westminster Assembly of Divines.

When Robert was a mere child, an anecdote is told of him that shows his sensibility and the intelligence with which he read. One day, he burst in upon his mother, and, sobbing all the while, implored her to whip him; and in explanation of this astonishing request cried, 'Oh, mother! mother! he that spareth the rod, hateth the child,'—fetching the words, of course, from Proverbs xviii. 24.

Mr. Alexander Gordon (in his brilliant Study of Fergusson) has strangely queried whether young Robert was not poking fun at his godly mother in the preceding story. But the emotion was too genuine to be so fantastically misinterpreted (*Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 277, p. 379).

'*Gleg at the uptak*,' the little fireside pupil soon got beyond maternal capacity to instruct. Accordingly, Robert is found in 1756 at a private or adventure school. His first teacher therein was a Mr. Philp, who had some years before opened an English school in Niddry's Wynd. This was nearly opposite Allan Ramsay's old book-shop and circulating library. This locality reminds us that, in the better than pseudo-apostolic succession of the poets, 'honest Allan's' predestined successor might have seen and been seen by the little dapper cheery old gentleman, who in his young days had sung as none had sung in Scottish 'leid' since Sir David Lyndsay. For he had still two years of a serene, blithe old age before his death in 1758. Memorable, too, that contemporaneously in distant Ayrshire little Robert Burns — born 1759 — was soon to arrive to succeed *his* predecessor.

All that has reached us—spite of considerable research—about Mr. Philp, is Thomas Sommers's passing notice of him: 'He was a teacher of respectability in his line: I knew him well, and his son the preacher.'

I had hoped to have traced the latter in the *Fasti Ecclesiæ*

Scoticanæ, but he nowhere occurs—and this suggests that, like Dominie Sampson, he was a 'stickit minister.'

Niddry's Wynd, where Mr. Philp's school was established in 1756—transferred from Blackfriar's Wynd—is all aglow with stirring national memories in even the somewhat dry historic pages of Sir Daniel Wilson's *Memorials of Old Edinburgh*, and still more brightly in Chambers's delightsome *Traditions*.

I like to think of our small scholar peering up at the still preserved polished ashlar fronts and richly decorated doorways of the steep old wynd, and spelling out the quaint-carven old-English lettered legends of their lintels. So inquisitive a child, who to his dying day delighted to revert to the time when near this very Niddry's Wynd

> 'Merlin laid Auld Reekie's causey,
> And made her o' his wark right saucy,'—

Merlin not being the mythical soothsayer, but a Frenchman named Marlin,—we may be sure would let nothing escape him. So one is free to picture him puzzling over one or other of the remaining inscriptions on the dormer window of a well-known steep crow-stepped gable—

Qui . Est . Alle . Super . Deus . (1583).

or any one of the thousand-and-one things that there reached back to a hoar antiquity.

Alexander Campbell, Irving, and Sommers state that Robert was only 'six months' under Mr. Philp, when he was 'ready' to enter the royal High School of his native city. But this brevity of preparation is an exaggeration of his mother's home-instruction. He went, as we saw, to Mr. Philp's school in 1756, and his name first appears in the registers of the High School as entered in the class of Mr. John Gilchrist in 1758; so that a good year and a half must have been spent at Mr. Philp's school.

Once more, it speaks well for his humble parents that they denied themselves still further to secure for their 'wee laddie' the best education the metropolis could afford.

Mr. John Gilchrist of the High School, Fergusson's first master there, has been graphically sketched for us in the

pleasant *Reminiscences and Anecdotes of Edinburgh in Former Times* of Henry Mackenzie—

'Gilchrist, a good-humoured man, with a good deal of comedy about him: liked by the class.'

The other contemporary masters of the High School—even learned Alexander Matheson, M.A., Rector, spite of being introduced into *Redgauntlet* as 'M——,' and spite of a very grand tomb—have long passed into oblivion. Nevertheless, there are abundant evidences that the education was far advanced for the time, and the discipline steadfast and uncompromising. Dr. Steven also gives full details of the course from term to term. Mackenzie summarily states—

'The scholars went through the four classes taught by the undermasters, reading the usual elementary Latin books,—for at that time no Greek was taught at the High School,—and so up to Virgil and Horace, Sallust and portions of Livy, along with the other classics. In the highest class some of the scholars remained two years.'

The mention of Sallust sends us to Nanty Ewart's Sallust in *Redgauntlet*—a High School touch of Sir Walter. There follows this on the hours of attendance—

'The hours of attendance were from 7 to 9 A.M., and after an interval of an hour for breakfast, from 10 to 12; then after another interval of two hours (latterly I think in my time [1752–53] three hours) for dinner, returned for two hours in the afternoon.'

It cannot be doubted, therefore, that Robert Fergusson was well-grounded; for John Gilchrist was a very able as well as a very enthusiastic teacher, and quick to take note of ability (Chambers's *Eminent Scotsmen, s.n.*). All the better, too, that he had the saving salt of humour.

Unfortunately, the little fellow's attendance was all along broken from his delicate health. But the unanimous testimony of all his early biographers is that, from his native quickness and remarkable memory, he very soon made up leeway and again stood abreast of his most advantaged competitors.

It argues no little force and decision of character that Master Robert thus handicapped, in his eighth year onward should have more than held his own; for, as Mr. Alexander

Gordon phrases it, 'The hours of the High School must have made pretty stiff work for an ailing boy.'

Robert Fergusson continued at the High School for the full terms of four years, from 1758 to 1760–1.

It is interesting to learn that in 1758 he paid 1s., and in 1761 2s. 6d., to the School Library Fund—the former being the ordinary amount, and the latter so exceptional that only a Scottish nobleman is entered for a like payment. I was disappointed to be informed by the present most obliging librarian that no record was kept of the books given out to the boys. All agree that Robert Fergusson from the outset was a devourer of books, and eager to listen when ballad or story was being told, albeit he was too resolved to be a scholar to trifle during school-hours, as Sir Walter, in his charmingly chatty General Preface, confesses of himself when at the same High School.

The roll of 'famous' boys of the High School in its earlier years is fragmentary and meagre. I have gleaned the following contemporaries in whole or in part during the terms of Fergusson's attendance. The years added are of their entering. Sir William Fettes, Bart., Lord Provost of Edinburgh (1758–9)—Campbell Majoribanks, Chairman of the H. E. India Company (1756–7)—Walter Ross, author of *Lectures on Conveyancing* (1760–1)—Alexander Fraser, Lord Woodhouselee (1758–9)—James Boswell, *the* Boswell (1756–7)—Professor John Bruce of Falkland (1761)—William Cruikshank, surgeon (1758)—Charles Dundas, M.P. for Orkney and Shetland (1758)—Major-General Thomas Dundas (1758)—Neil Primrose, third Earl of Rosebery (1757)—Lord Rosehill, eldest son of the Earl of Northesk (1761)—Matthew Ross, Dean of the Faculty of Advocates (1760–1)—Professor James Russell (1761)—Sir John Sinclair, Bart., of Ulbster (1761)—Professor Dugald Stewart (1761)—Archibald Burnett.

More than one of the names in this short bead-roll suggest how different Robert Fergusson's short life might have been if one or other of them had 'remembered Joseph.' I think of scores on scores of men who had not a spark of his genius who, just because they were 'taken up' and befriended early, rose to position and prosperity.

The greatest of all the Edinburgh High School boys, Sir

Walter, has painted for us the ongoings of the lads as between Town and Gown—in *Redgauntlet.*

Robert Fergusson was too young—eight to eleven—and probably too weakly to take part in these Homeric pitched battles, but he must frequently have heard the stones clattering and seen the knuckled fists do their office. And even if he did not take active or actual part in the fighting himself, he would most certainly be well acquainted with those who had been taught, as Darsie Latimer was by Alan Fairford—

'To smoke a cobbler, pin a losen, head a bicker, and hold the bonnets' (*i.e.* cover the chimney-top of a cobbler to send down the smothering 'smeek,' so as to smoke him out; break a window; head a skirmish with stones, and hold the bonnet or handkerchief which used to divide High School boys when fighting).

Fergusson undoubtedly had seen those—I have been quoting *Redgauntlet*—

'who had become the pride of the Yards and the dread of the hucksters of the High School Wynd,' and like them, all but certainly, he had not been 'contented with humbly passing through the Cowgate Port, without climbing over the top of it.' 'You taught me,' says Darsie Latimer to Fairford, 'to keep my fingers off the weak and to clench my fist against the strong—to carry no tales out of school—to stand forth like a true man—obey the stern order of *Pande manum,* and endure my paumies without wincing, like one that is determined not to be the better of them.'

These were the glorious republican rules on which Robert Fergusson was trained.

Another '*ploy*' of the High School of Fergusson's day must have had an irresistible attraction to him, as being 'cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd' in the unsavoury Cap-and-Feather Close, or other wynd. I refer to the Saturday afternoon excursions into the country. One is gladly willing to think of his little pallid cheeks ruddying during these 'escapes'—loveable Cowley's word. Sir Walter again has told us of these excursions—

'Long walks through the solitary and romantic environs of Arthur's Seat, Salisbury Crags, Braid Hills, and similar places in the vicinity of Edinburgh; and the recollection of these holidays still forms an oasis in the pilgrimage which I have to look back upon.'

Long afterwards another Old Boy celebrated in verse similar excursions—

> 'How we scamper'd away to the North and South Esk
> As soon as our emperor quitted his desk.'
>
> (STEVEN, pp. 99–100.)

On completing his curriculum at the High School of Edinburgh, a gleam of brightness fell athwart the humble home of the Fergussons.

This was through a 'presentation' in favour of Fergusson to a 'mortification' or bursary—equivalent to an exhibition in English universities—founded by the Rev. David Fergusson, parish minister of Strathmartine, which provided for the 'maintenance and education of two poor children' of his own surname, at the Grammar School of Dundee and (if found qualified and deserving) at the University of St. Andrews. The influence used to obtain this is not recorded apparently.

This must have brought no common joy to Mr. and Mrs. William Fergusson; for not only did it secure, free of cost, a prolongation of a first-class education, but also gave them the prospect of their earnest desire being fulfilled of one day seeing their 'ain laddie' walking in the footsteps of his two great-grandfathers — an ambition common to the humblest of Scottish folks, and meaning a great deal besides grit.

The deed of the Strathmartine-Fergusson 'bursary' and the minutes of the successive meetings of the patrons that resulted in the 'presentation,' were given by me in full in my volume of 1851. It seems only necessary, therefore, to refer the antiquarian reader thither. But I must not withhold the clause that reveals the provisions and conditions made:—

> It is 'appointed and ordained' that 'the two children of the quality foresaid, from the age of nine years until they attain to fourteen years compleat, be maintained, educate and brought up at the Grammar School of Dundee, and be boarded with one of the surname of Fergusson in case there be any that can do the same, and failzing of that, in any honest house, within the said Burgh, of a good report, and that at such rates and prices yearly or quarterly as the said patrons and administrators shall think fitt; and be furnished (the saids children) with sufficient cloaths and necessaries for their bodies, head and feet: their coats being always of a grey colour lined with blue sleeves.'

A leaf having been abstracted from the Minute-Book of the Trust, I am unable to state exactly when Fergusson first entered the Grammar School of Dundee, but from documents extant it must have been early in 1762, that is shortly after the completion of his final term at the High School of Edinburgh (1761), or when in his eleventh year.

It was no going down, rather an ascent, to have been thus transferred from Edinburgh High School to the Grammar School of Dundee, as is abundantly proven by the well-written 'History' of the latter, and related works of Mr. A. H. Millar of Dundee (*Bazaar Book on the School and 'Roll of Eminent Burgesses* 1513–1846': 1887).

The engraving of it as it stood in St. Clement's Lane compares favourably with its then Edinburgh rival, while the facts narrated of the education and the masters are declarative of high standards. '*Bonnie* Dundee,' if still we may apply Tom D'Urfey's epithet in his doggerel song, is justly proud of her great school.

Doubtless there was heartache all round at home on parting with their little great-eyed 'Benjamin,' to go away among strangers, and a wrench to the delicate boy of eleven to part from his good mother especially; for then it was a far cry from Edinburgh to Dundee.

Sooth to say one can hardly help feeling that, if young Robert had grown up in these school and college years under the immediate eyes of his wise and godly parents, his whole after-life might have taken a finer mould and been spared much evil and anguish. Nevertheless, on both sides—parental and filial—the parting had to be borne.

We have no intelligence of Fergusson's progress at the Grammar School of Dundee. He must, however, have continued his alertness, his impulsive fits of application, his bookishness; for, when his fourteenth year was completed in 1764, his father had no difficulty in obtaining from the local Presbytery a certificate of his capacity for being put to the College of St. Andrews, agreeably to the terms of the Mortification. In the already-named volume of 1851, the various minutes of meetings of the patrons and relative documents are reproduced at length. The gist is that 'having sent for the boy,' and he 'signifying his inclination to

follow out his learning and go to the College of St. Andrews,' the necessary papers were prepared for him as a bursar-student.

This narrative of the facts of the transference from Edinburgh to Dundee and from Dundee to St. Andrews corrects a number of blunders of former biographers; *e.g.*, Bishop Gleig in Supplement to the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (1801), and Alexander Campbell in his *Introduction to the History of Scottish Poetry* make two mistakes. The former marvels at and tacitly blames the paternal preference of St. Andrews over Fergusson's native Edinburgh University, when it was no preference, but was involved in the conditions of the bursary. The latter states that on leaving Dundee he returned to Edinburgh, and there pursued for one session his academic course. I account for Campbell's misstatement by an entry in the Matriculation-Book of Edinburgh University of *a* Robert Fergusson in 1765, as follows:—

'Rob^t. Ferguson Discipuli D. Gul. Wallace Legis Municipalis Professor 1765.'

Having completed our narrative of Fergusson's attendance at the Grammar School of Dundee and its happy issue in his being passed on to the University, I have now to tell of a lesser thing that preceded his going to St. Andrews, viz. a visit of Robert and his mother to the North, from early in August to early in September of 1764.

I am again fortunate enough to be able to illustrate this visit with other two letters from William Fergusson—one addressed to his wife, and the second to her brother—who was then resident at Round Lichnot, one of his various farms. These two letters are brim-full of interest. The earlier reveals how the worthy man felt 'solitary' and 'lonely' without his wife and boy; how he was gladdened to know that 'Rob had held out the journey well'—doubtless most of it on foot, and thereby bewraying continuous home-thrift of the same type with the mother of Robert Nicoll, when she walked all the long way from Perthshire to Leeds to visit her dying son. Noticeable, too, is another jet of light on fireside industry in 'linen blued and at the lapping,' and 'a cotton-piece not yet off the field' (*i.e.* bleaching).

WILLIAM FERGUSSON TO MRS. FERGUSSON.

'EDINBURGH, *17th August* 1764.

'MY DEAREST,—As I hope this will reach you before you set out from Roundlichnot [for some other of the farms unnamed] I hereby acknowledge the receipt of your favours of 13th. This day has removed my anxiety's occasioned by frequent apprehensions of your having met with some disaster in your journey, by the bad weather, or otherways. I notice your resolution with regard to the time of setting out, and approve thereof, notwithstanding I have had a solitary fortnight already, and in view of a third lonely Sabbath, the only time I can command as my own. It gives me no small satisfaction to find you have had so agreeable a meeting with your brother and sisters, and that Rob has held out the journey.

'I arrived from Saltonfield Sunday morning by 9 o'clock, when it rained so hard in this country, that I was wet [to] the skin.

'Your linen is blued, and at the lapping, and will be in soon: the cotton piece not yet off the field, as they are determined for a good colour. Your compts. to Kylahuntlie came too late, for they set out for Badenoch with Inverhall Tuesday last and left compts. to you.

'I would have wrote Mr. Forbes and thanked him for his civilities, but had only time to scrawl this for you in the office; during which performance I had twenty interruptions. Meantime I make offer of compts. to your brother; Mrs. Forbes; the Aunt in case the care about her cat will allow her to accept of them: and to all other friends and relations in the neighbourhood.

'It's become dark, so must conclude with wishing Mr. Forbes and family all possible happiness, and yourself a speedy and safe return.—I am, my Dearest, your aff^e. Husband, WILL. FERGUSSON.'[1]

The fact that the foregoing letter was among the Inverarity MSS. lets us know that the good woman had preserved it and brought it back with her to Edinburgh. This is beautiful. Now comes a brightly humorous letter.

WILLIAM FERGUSSON TO MR. JOHN FORBES.

'EDINBURGH, *13th September* 1764.

'DEAR SIR,—I had the pleasure of your obliging favours of 7th inst. advising me of your family's welfare, at which we are all extremely glad. I hear with some concern that the aunt's affection for the cat is not in any degree alienate, considering that now she has an opportunity of seeing an object that merits her warmest affections; and as my wife has heard nothing from her by this opportunity, she is suspicious of having offended her by saying something she thought hurtfull to Gibbie's character (=puss).

'My wife was not a bit wearied on her return, and has been in a much

[1] The odd word 'lapping' (as above) means 'beating,' a well-known process; and we still speak of 'lapping water' or water beating on a rock.

better state of health since, than for some years past, and has recovered a keen appetite.

'It will give me real pleasure to know so oft as opportunity permitts, how you, Mrs. Forbes, the Aunt and little Jamie do, as it is the only thing next to a personal interview, which the uninterrupted hurry of business presents.

'Baby (= Barbara) and her husband are well, and with my wife, Hary, Rob and Pegie, join with me in most affectionat compliments to you, Mrs. Forbes and young son, the Aunt and all other connections in your neighbourhood: being in a hurry, I am, dear Sir, your most affe. Brother and humble Servt., WILL. FERGUSSON.

'Please mind the Aunt to call for a ¼ lb. of snuff from the waggoner.'

These letters, with their sparkle of humour concerning the venerable and 'touchy' spinster whose 'mull' is replenished as a peace-offering for any real or imagined disrespect to Gibbie, presents William Fergusson in 'good spirits'—as the saying is in Scotland. This is explained by the mention of Saltonfield. This was Salton Field in Haddingtonshire, which was the first place selected by the British Linen Company for a bleachfield. In 1762–3 he obtained the post of managing-clerk — designated sometimes 'accountant'—in the linen department of this great Company in the Canongate of Edinburgh. His appointment was made in view of the gradual winding-up of the linen manufacturing department, preparatory to the Company becoming the strong and renowned Bank proper that it speedily became and still remains.[1]

His early merchant and trading experiences in Aberdeen and in Carrubber's Close, Edinburgh, combined with his abilities as an accountant, peculiarly qualified William Fergusson for his new position, and specifically for carrying the Company over the transition period.

He remained in this respectable and responsible post in the Bank, as in the Company, until his death; never having great emoluments, but all along held in the highest esteem by the able men who sustained the business. During these closing years he must have been altogether less hurried, less worried, and much more master of his own time and goings.

[1] A privately-printed brochure (1896–7) of the Bank gives an interesting account of the origin and progress of the British Linen Company, as a linen company and as a bank, from 1746 onward. All honour is due to its founders.

Not only so, but while still in the employment of Mr. Walter Fergusson he obtained through Lord Deskford a temporary sinecure office of clerk to the French prisoners of war in Edinburgh, wherein Campbell states 'he was of the utmost service to the Government as well as to the unfortunate prisoners.'

Mrs. Fergusson must have greatly enjoyed her month's visit to her native district, while we may be sure that to so lively and impressionable a boy it could not but be as 'opening paradise.'

Round Lichnot, whither the visitors proceeded in the first instance, is just the wooded, bosky, hill-bastioned country for a quick boy's holiday—opening out in all directions for walks, bird-nesting, trouting, hazel-nut and bramble-berry gathering, pilgrimages to famous spots, and the like.

The present dwelling-house of Round Lichnot commands an extensive view of the Howe of the Garioch. In one part of the wood called 'the Doulart,' there was a small heronry. This means that there were tall trees, and Master Robert certainly would climb them. But play would not be all, in the prospect of proceeding to the University. I like to conceive of him as seeking out the death-scene of Macbeth, and historic places associated with Robert Bruce and the Comyns, the Battle of Harlaw, and the still living memories of the '15 and '45. These would lead him to hill-tops—Bennachie chief—and rivers, Urie and Don—forestry and moors, with old legend-haunted castles—Kildrummy—Barra—and affording the vividly imaginative boy abundant scope for observation and enjoyment.

CHAPTER V

UNIVERSITY OF ST. ANDREWS

'The city of the scarlet gown.'
ANDREW LANG.

By our narrative in c. iv. it is seen that Fergusson was at home in Edinburgh in September 1764, after his vacation rambles among the hills and woodland of his uncle's farms and their classic neighbourhood. The household had then probably removed from the Cap-and-Feather Close to another of the same type of decayed splendour, called Warriston's Close, also off the High Street—our next letter of William Fergusson being dated from there.

I resist the temptation of dwelling on the historic-biographic memories and associations of this new wynd-home. Are they not written in the chronicles of Dr. Robert Chambers, Sir Daniel Wilson, John Reid, and a host of other lovers of our fair city?

The prematurely ageing couple—William Fergusson, alas! troubled with an asthma and '*a sair host*' (= cough)—were now grandfather and grandmother; for, in sending the 'affectionate compliments' of themselves and Hary and Rob and Peggie, it will be remembered Baby, *i.e.* Barbara Fergusson and her husband Duval, were reported as 'well,' and their first-born arrived.

Young Robin, now in his fourteenth year, had thus an interval of some months in his native city. But the holiday-time wore to an end. The bursary was to be looked after. And so, on 7th December 1764, father and son—as the minute runs—'compeared' before the patrons, with the result already told.

Fergusson's mother was so out-and-out a sagacious woman, as well as devout—as was Agnes Brown, mother

of the greater Robert—that we may assume that her ebullient and impulsive 'laddie' received many a grave counsel and heard many a fervent prayer in his behalf. After the Scottish reticent manner, the whole family would be quietly proud of their Robert's going to College.

It is permissible to imagine them all gathered around the family-hearth and the immortal portraiture of the 'Cotter's Saturday Night' foreshown—

> 'The parents, partial, eye their hopeful years;
> ANTICIPATION forward points the view;
> The mother, wi' her needles an' her shears,
> Gars auld claes look amaist as weel's the new;
> The father mixes a' wi' admonition due' (st. 5).

The mother would be doubly called on in this instance to requisition her 'needles an' her shears' and her utmost skill; for the provided 'grey suit, with blue sleeves,' of the Grammar School, Dundee, would be roughly used in Round Lichnot woods, and perchance require to be adapted for the University.

I have a vision of mother and son on their knees just before parting, for the Inverarity MSS. told me of a gift-Bible in two volumes daintily bound in red morocco with flaps, and an inscription written by the mother and her Robert's name. I can hardly forgive the carelessness that lost this relic—all the more that Robert Fergusson himself preserved it lovingly, and in the deep-shadowed end clave to it. I can think, and one thinks inevitably, of only one other copy of the Bible of equal sacredness—the gift to 'Highland Mary.'

It needs not that I reproduce here from my volume of 1851 either the missive-letter of the patrons that Fergusson carried with him, or a letter from his father to the Treasurer of the University on arrangement for payments of the bursary money and dues. Things must have been pleasantly arranged as wished by William Fergusson; and though it is somewhat anticipating, it may be at this point mentioned from Chambers, that Fergusson was accustomed to perpetrate in connection with his receiving monies, a frolic which marks the singular vivacity of his character:—

'Whenever he received a remittance from his friends at Edinburgh, he hung out the money in a little bag attached by a string to the end of

a pole fixed on his [chamber] window, and there he would let it dangle for a whole day in the wind. He is supposed to have done this partly from puerile exultation in the possession of his wealth [!] and partly by way of making a bravado in the eyes of his companions; among whom, no doubt, the slenderness of their funds, and the failure of supplies, would be frequent subjects of raillery.'

The Registers of St. Andrews University are strangely imperfect at the period of Robert Fergusson's arrival there. But fortunately his matriculation is duly entered—signed in a schoolboy rounded autograph, very different from that adopted later. It is under date of February 1765, or in his fifteenth year.

Incidentally William Fergusson's letter to the Treasurer informs us that his Professors of 1764–5 were Wilson and Morton. The former was Professor of Humanity or Latin, the latter of Greek. These constituted the usual first session's course, as it still does in all the Scottish Churches. The other Professors of Fergusson's time were Robert Watson, Logic and Metaphysics—a compound of Bacon, Locke, and Aristotle filtered through Peter Ramus, and which must have been very humdrum and commonplace; John Young, Moral Philosophy; William Wilkie, D.D., Natural Philosophy; Nicolas Vilant, Mathematics; Richard Dick, Civil History.

When the 'boy,' summoned before the patrons, stated that it was his wish to 'pursue his learning' by going to College, his intention was to study with a view to becoming a minister of the Kirk of Scotland.

It is to be suspected that, notwithstanding those clerical links that we have traced (in c. ii.) this was a choice made for him by his godly father and mother rather than by himself; for both seem to have kept in tenacious and loving memory their boy's two great-grandfathers, as well as shared that Scottish ambition (so un-English) to have at least 'ae son' in the ministry of the gospel.

I have known the double influence to work blessedly. I have also known it to work disastrously.

It cannot be supposed that, so early as in his twelfth or even fourteenth year, Fergusson could personally have any decided resolution or leaning toward the destination intended for him. But he reverenced his reverence-worthy

father and loved his mother too fondly to go contrary to their wishes. Accordingly, so early as 1765–6, he is found writing his name on his class-books 'Rob^t. Fergusson, Student in Divinity'! One book with this inscription was formerly in possession of Mrs. Inverarity. It is entitled *A Defence of the Church Government, Faith, Worship, and Spirit of the Presbyterians.* By John Anderson, M.A., 1714.

I have seen several others, and among them, if I err not, a neatly-bound copy of Professor William Dunlop's masterly Introduction to the Confession of Faith, with numerous markings, and also of Ralph Erskine's extremely remarkable metaphysique, *Faith no Fancy*, and odd volumes of the Poets. In every case I was struck with the fineness of the copies chosen; our Poet, like Michael Bruce, the sweet singer of the 'Ode to the Cuckoo' and the Logan-filched 'Paraphrases,' having been evidently nice in regard to his books.

Certain of these chance-preserved books of Fergusson are valuable biographically as indicating two things, viz. that he had sought to master the teaching of that Creed and body of doctrine that he might one day be called on to subscribe and profess and preach; and secondly, poetical tastes. His Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher, Milton, Samuel Butler, Pope, Shenstone, John Gay, and Thomas Gray were good and suggestive selections, and compare favourably with Robert Burns's list of early-read books.

He entered the University with the highest promise. He brought a fine record from his advent in Mr. Philp's English School in Niddry's Wynd, and of his progress through the four years in the High School of Edinburgh, and his three years in the Grammar School of Dundee. His course throughout was rightly characterised by Dr. David Irving—chilliest and most meanly prejudiced of his biographers—as 'surprising.'

Neither Professor Wilson nor Professor Morton has left behind him any proof of scholarship or teaching faculty. On the contrary, the late Professor William Tennant of the same University had the impression that they were both 'dry sticks,' notwithstanding their absorption of abundant claret and ale, and utterly unfitted to stir to enthusiasm of learning.

However this may have been, Mr. Thomas Ruddiman—the cultured son of the grammarian, Thomas Ruddiman—in his little memoir of Fergusson of 1779—states, that the young Poet had said to him 'that Virgil and Horace were the only Latin authors he would ever look at while he was at the University.'

His High School master, John Gilchrist, no doubt indoctrinated him with the twofold preference. In agreement with it, his 'Farmer's Ingle' has a motto from Virgil, while—it is believed—one of his earliest pieces in the vernacular is the rendering of Horace (Ode xi. lib. i.). I make room for this snatch, and it may be set beside Allan Ramsay's wonderful rendering of the Ode to Thaliarchus, 'Look up to Pentland's tow'ring tap.'

'Ne'er fash your thumb what gods decree
To be the weird o' you or me,
Nor deal in cantrup's kittle cunning
To speir how fast your days are running;
But patient lippen for the best,
Nor be in dowy thought opprest,
Whether we see mair winters come
Than this that spits wi' canker'd foam.
Now moisten weel your geyzand wa's
Wi' couthy friends and hearty blaws; = a pipe.
Ne'er let your hope o'ergang your days,
For eild and thraldom never stays:
The day looks gash, toot aff your horn,
Nor care yae strae about the morn.'

I call this Ode early, because I found it among the Ruddiman MSS., written in a very boyish hand, as though it had been a High School exercise, corresponding with that of Sir Walter's which Dr. Steven so proudly facsimiled in his 'History.' This being so, surely the raciness and distinction of the vocabulary of this probably eleven or twelve years old paraphrase, is notable and prophetic. Within the small compass of fourteen lines we have these thoroughly Scottish words—'fash,' 'weird,' 'cantrups,' 'kittle,' 'speir,' 'lippen,' 'dowy,' 'mair,' 'weel,' 'geyzand,' 'wa's,' 'couthy,' 'blaws,' 'o'ergang,' 'eild,' 'gash,' 'toot aff,' 'yae strae,' 'the morn.' Not since Allan Ramsay's rural pipe had ceased its music had the vernacular been turned to so effective account.

The fact that he had thus before entering his teens

dashed off such a successful and idiomatic little poem prepares us for another fact, that he was only newly arrived and entered in the University when he came to be known as a rhymer in the vernacular. But Thomas Sommers overstates when he says that 'at this time [1765] his poetical talents were beginning to appear,' and that 'every day produced something new from his fertile pen, which was employed in satirising the foibles of the Professors and of his fellow-students.'

'Every day . . . something new' is rather strong. But it seems certain that, if he did not like Pope 'lisp in numbers,' he could affirm with a greater bard, that he 'was early smit with the love of song.' Nor is the testimony of his early biographers, that his verse-attempts—borrowing Henry Ellison's coinage — won the admiration of his Professors as well as of his fellow-students, to be overlooked. That they were satiric of themselves, and nevertheless pleased, is noteworthy.

We have more than rumour and his biographers' appreciations to settle this matter. Professor David Gregory, a scion of the famous Gregory family, died on 13th April 1765, or within about three months of Fergusson's entrance on his academic studies, and forthwith there was being circulated in manuscript an Elegy on his death, in vernacular strong and racy of the soil as the Horatian ode, and redolent at a bound of his dry, sly humour, irrepressible waggery, and distinctive picturesqueness. This Elegy is so unmistakable an evidence that Robert Fergusson in his fifteenth year had so far 'found himself,' that we must pause over three of its stanzas :—

'Now mourn, ye college masters a' !
And frae your ein a tear lat fa',
Fam'd Gregory death has taen awa'
Without remeid ;
The skaith ye've met wi's nae that sma',
Sin Gregory's dead.

. . . . . .

He could, by Euclid, prove lang syne
A ganging point compos'd a line ;
By numbers too he cou'd divine,
Whan he did read,
That three times three just made up nine ;
But now he's dead.

. . . . . .

Great 'casion hae we a' to weep,
An' cleed our skins in mourning deep,
For Gregory death will fairly keep
To take his nap;
He'll till the resurrection sleep
As sound's a tap.'

All things considered, I must pronounce the little Ode and this Elegy to have been a preluding 'new note' amidst the hackneyed conventionalities and smooth inanimities of the poetry of the period, and a foreshadowing that the college of William Dunbar, William Stewart, and Sir David Lyndsay—all St. Andrews students—would have one successor at least. Then the Elegy is important as being a typical example of the length the boy-student allowed himself to go. It attests that his satire was wholly playful and without malice. One laments that other examples have not been transmitted. That there were others, as Sommers represents, is certain. Thomas Ruddiman thus puts it: 'He had not been long at College when certain Macaronic satires against some of the masters were circulated by him.'

These poetic exercises may be interpreted as declarative of the fact that our Poet was desultory rather than systematic in his studies; intermittent, not steadfast. But, as at the High School of Edinburgh, he never had any difficulty in making up arrears when stung into application. From childhood, as we saw, his constitution was delicate and hindering. None the less he must have had a remarkable recuperative vitality; for whenever called upon for specific exertion he overcame his natural sickliness and racking headaches and sleeplessness, and went at the required tasks with a will and swing. This is the testimony of all his biographers.

The late Ven. Principal Dr. John Lee of Edinburgh University drew up for me a list of the ultimately more distinguished fellow-students of Fergusson as follows:—Professor Playfair, Principal Dr. Hill, Dr. John Hill, Dr. Andrew Duncan, the Hon. Henry Erskine, and his brother Lord Chancellor Erskine, Dr. James Brown, Dr. William Ritchie, Dr. George Campbell, father of John, Lord Chancellor Campbell, Mr. David Wilkie, father of Sir David Wilkie; and Dr. Lee himself must be added.

There was no registration of admissions in successive sessions or terms in St. Andrews University beyond the initial matriculation signature; indeed, even later, it would seem no accurate roll of the students was kept. Hence we cannot now ascertain the order of Fergusson's academic curriculum. But it may safely be assumed that he followed the usual course of a student in divinity after two sessions in Latin and Greek, viz. Mathematics, Logic and Metaphysics, Ethics or Moral Philosophy, and Natural Philosophy. I do not find that he ever entered on the study of theology proper.

Unexpectedly, for so mercurial a lad, it is stated by his first biographers that he excelled in Mathematics. It is also known from various authentic sources that he early gained the marked approbation and friendship of Professor William Wilkie of the Natural Philosophy class. One pleasant evidence of this is that this remarkable man—no poet, as *The Epigoniad* and *Fables* demonstrate, but of unquestionable brains and conversational force after the type of Samuel Johnson—employed Fergusson to make a fair copy of his Lectures, and was wont to carry him with him at 'week-ends' to his hillside farm. The last a noticeable thing to be returned upon.

Of course, in our knowledge of his temperament and sprightly character we expect to hear of tricks and frolics, freaks and fantasies, of riotous animal spirits, gamesome poking i' the ribs of shallow-pated Gravity and pompous Inaninity; nor are we disappointed. The sorrow and the shame it is that, as with that ghoul, Gabriel Harvey, writing evil of Robert Greene in the teeth of a penitence that might have melted the stoniest heart; or as Robert Burns had in Robert Heron a mean-spirited avenger of the poet's too realistic portraiture of him in his verse-letter to Dr. Blacklock, that fired him to rake the gutters of Dumfries gossip for garbage; or as Rufus Griswold, in our own generation, first drew the moral-portrait of Edgar Allan Poe in darkest colours fetched from malignant slanderers—the first teller of these floating anecdotes so took them down from 'Scandal's unforgiving lips' as to poison the minds and mislead the judgment of nearly all after-biographers. I charged Dr. David Irving with it in his lifetime, and I place it in fore-

front record here, that in his first Life of Fergusson he put things in such a fashion as conveyed a wholly wrong impression of the Poet's character. True that in his second edition of 1800–1 he had ignominiously to retract in a post-script the blackest of his false averments; but, unhappily, instead of cancelling the pages that contained the false-hoods, his retractations were hidden away at the end of the book, and the evil was done and has been perpetuated, as evidenced by even R. L. Stevenson's and Andrew Lang's falling in with the mendacious and cruel epithets of 'drunken' and 'vicious,' and with a conception of him as from the beginning a 'wastrel.' The simple truth is that all this detestable misconception and misrepresentation have arisen from exaggerating mere frolics into vices, mere boyish tricksomeness into crimes, and so capturing successive biographers.

To make good this my condemnation, I shall in integrity place before my readers the whole of these anecdotes. The first comes early, viz. that on one occasion having strayed with some fellow 'scarlet-gowns' into a farm-house on the Magus Muir,—a Saturday afternoon favourite excursion,—and learning that the herd 'laddie' had sur-feited himself with theftuous practice in the dairy, Fergusson asked to be shown the 'culprit-patient,' and this being done, sucked the end of his cane and prescribed with as much gravity as if he had been a full-fledged M.D. There you have the whole: and even the Rev. Dr. James Browne, who was his companion in the exploit, shakes his empty skull and—moralises!—an arrant absurdity.

A second anecdote is of kin with the first, and over it other '*boss*' (=brainless) heads have been shaken *à la* Eldon—preposterously. It thus runs: It is related that, his voice being excellent, he was required oftener than was at all agreeable to him to officiate as precentor in the College Chapel.

His 'wicked wit,' says Dr. Robert Chambers, after Alexander Campbell, 'suggested a method of getting rid of the distasteful employment, which he did not scruple to put in practice, though there was great danger that it would incense the heads of the College against him. It is customary in Scotland for persons who are in a dangerous state of illness, or who by other "necessary causes" are detained from public worship, to give in a *line* or written request, asking the prayers

of the congregation, which the precentor reads aloud immediately before the prayer. Fergusson, availing himself of this custom, rose up in the desk and, with the usual nasal solemnity of tone, pronounced as if read from a paper this petition: "Remember in prayer, a young man (then present) of whom, from the sudden effects of inebriety, there appears but small hope of recovery." A *contretemps* so utterly indecorous, so travestying proprieties, could not but be frowned upon by the grave Professors, not the less so from the incontrollable titter and mirth with which it was received among the students, and eke, for they were no Agelasti, on more than one professorial visage, on the occasion.'

Fergusson was 'reprimanded,' and—what he wished—relieved of his precentorship, but continued to be heard clear as a bell above all others in the singing of the College Kirk, as one who knew testified to Hugh Miller.

Close bordering on profanity, some '*unco guid*' may exclaim; and yet there was no shadow of profanity intended, or in the young wag's thought.

A third anecdote is pretty much akin with the second. Dr. Charles Rogers, in his *Autobiography* (pp. 15, 16), tells it at great length, on the authority of his aged father. I must summarise. The food of even the bursar-students—as we shall see anon—was poor and unvaried, and Fergusson planned to secure an improvement. The opportunity soon offered itself. Each bursar had to take his turn in invoking a 'blessing' at the meals. On his turn coming round, he with all gravity repeated these lines—

> 'For rabbits young and for rabbits old,
> For rabbits hot and for rabbits cold,
> For rabbits tender and for rabbits tough,
> Our thanks we render, for we've had enough.'

The Professors, we are told, were aghast, and—silent. The Senatus Academicus was convened, and the venerable masters of the College deliberated as to how the offender should be punished. It was ultimately ruled that the graceless poet should not only escape censure, but that the vendor of rabbits—and again this was just what Fergusson wished—should be instructed that his supply would be required less frequently.

Once more, how wooden, how utterly without least sense or understanding of humour, your 'moralisers' who magnify this ebullience of waggery into 'a grave moral offence'! Fiddlesticks, 'most reverend doctors'!

As I write these words there reaches me, in *Good Words* for August 1897, a charming paper by Sheriff Campbell Smith, LL.D., on a 'Scotch Lady of the Olden Time,' Mrs. James Hunter of St. Andrews; and lo! her 'reminiscence' of that grandest and strongest and also most loveable of Scotsmen—THOMAS CHALMERS—comes to laugh out of court all such pharisaic vituperation of Robert Fergusson for frolics such as these.

'She held,' says the Sheriff, 'a better opinion of Chalmers than most of the then citizens of St. Andrews. She said, "The Toon's folk called him 'Daft Tam Chalmers,' but there was naething daft about him; he was a wild, merry reel-o'-Bogie laddie, full of fun and mischief, but very clever. I aye thought he would turn out something uncommon, but I never thought he would turn out a saint"' (p. 564).

Let that clear the cobwebs from green-spectacled eyes when misled into hard thoughts of our young Poet. I cap it, too, with the story told by Mr. James Inverarity, his nephew. Asking one of the attendant 'gate-porters' if he remembered Fergusson, he received for answer,—and at a dash it paints him for us,—'Bob Fergusson! Did I ken him? Ay, weel I did. I've aften pitten him tae the door. He was a tricky callant, *but a fine laddie for a' that.*' Most just: the impulse of the moment appears at all times to have been irresistible with Fergusson; and, accordingly, if a frolicsome and mirth-provoking idea got into his ever-working brain, it must *instanter* take shape, come what penalty might.[1]

I come now to the last and basest transmitted anecdote, and I must give proof and disproof in full; for the most pestiferous and prejudiced account was given by Dr. David Irving, as thus—

'What amused himself tended to disturb the quiet of others. His misdemeanours were either so frequent, or of such a kind that, after a residence of four years, he exposed himself to the disgrace of a formal expulsion from the University. The eloquence of Dr. Wilkie was powerfully exerted in his behalf, but without producing the desired effect; the other members of the Senatus Academicus were by no means disposed to listen to his arguments; and the imprudent youth was accordingly dismissed' (p. 9).

[1] Dr. Rogers gives other two anecdotes on two fellow-students, but as they are poor, and as the names introduced are not found in the College lists, it is not worth while reproducing them.

Such a harsh and unqualified statement naturally aggrieved the admirers of the Poet. The afterwards renowned Professor Playfair at once challenged the narrative, and, as we saw, Irving had to withdraw it. But this was justifiably held to be insufficient. It was held that justice could only be done by absolutely cancelling the leaf containing the account. This was *not* done. An additional cost of perhaps a sovereign was reckoned to outweigh the claims of the dead young Poet. And so his nephew before-named, Mr. James Inverarity, published in the *Scots Magazine* a paper entitled 'Strictures on David Irving's Life of Robert Fergusson' (1801, p. 19), which, though not well put together, gave documentary proof traversing the statement. Thither I refer my readers wishful to verify my accusation. I prefer giving here a briefer narrative, which, by the two-fold kindness of the Ven. Principal Lee and Dr. David Laing, it was my privilege to furnish in my vol. of 1851. The following record of the incident is taken from the Manuscript Private Journal of Professor and Principal Tullidelph of St. Andrews. As this Journal was kept regularly day after day from the year 1734 to 1774, it is first-hand authority.

'*26th March* 1768.

'I extruded Alexander Grant *sine spe redeundi* (=without hope of return) on account of a continued course of irregularity for some weeks past, particularly for a riot committed with some accomplices on Lewis Grant, about one o'clock of the morning of this 26th of March, and also extruded Rob^t. Fergusson and Charles Stewart, his accomplices in that riot. Rob^t. Fergusson likewise had wantonly given up John Adamson's name to be prayed for. I deprived John Adamson of his Server's place, for being out all night, and for imposing on the Hebdomadar, by a false pretext, to get to the dancing school another night.

'*N.B.*—30th March 1768. Rob^t. Fergusson and Charles Stewart were received in again at a meeting of the Masters.'

Dr. Robert Chambers, in striking contrast with Irving, thus generously summarises the very small matter:—

'On the whole, this transaction affords a proof that Fergusson, whatever might have been his indiscretions, had not, by refractory or disrespectful conduct, rendered himself obnoxious to the heads of the University, since, had that been the case, it is to be presumed they would have availed themselves of this infraction of academical discipline to make good his expulsion' (*Eminent Scotsmen, s.n.*).

Precisely so. The 'riot' was a collision between the

winners and the losers of the Earl of Kinnoul's prizes; and he must have slender knowledge of school and college life who magnifies such inevitable conflicts into prodigious wickedness. How easy it were to parallel all this in the lives of afterwards illustrious and venerated men: ay, and Robert Fergusson was just the type of lad to stand up, like Donovan Farrant, and accuse himself of leadership in the row. To your wise blockheads who think otherwise and will moralise, I call on Robert Burns to speak—

> 'The cleanest corn that e'er was dight
> May hae some piles o' caff in,
> Sae ne'er a fellow-mortal slight
> For random fits o' daffin'.'

I note, finally, that Robert Fergusson was then only a little over seventeen years of age!

I feel sure that my full account will be acceptable, and neutralise the perpetually recrudescent misrepresentation.

Contemporaneous with these incidents, Fergusson was occupied with poetical plans; nor was he without a sound adviser besides Dr. Wilkie. In a letter from his sailor-brother Hary, we get a glimpse of him—

'I read with attention the Burial-letter you versified and your poetical letter to the Cripple Laureat [I intercalate, probably Claudero, *alias* cripple James Wilson, the doggerel rhymer, who has just been introduced as a leading character in Omond's novel of Edinburgh in 1774, *L'Estrange*]: the former I approve of, but cannot recommend y^e^ latter in point of rhyme. You'll please notice that the first and fifth and the second and fourth lines, in compositions of the like kind, such as Habbie Simpson, &c., chime with one another.'

The date of this letter is torn away, but from a subsequent notice of the 'New Theatre going briskly forward,' the foundation of which had been laid on 16th March 1768, it must have belonged to that year.

Neither of the poems criticised has been preserved. But he was aiming at something higher than mere occasional verses. For not only was he writing on fly-leaves of some of his books dramatic speeches, but it appears certain that he had proceeded as far as two acts of a tragedy on Sir William Wallace—a characteristic election of subject. He abandoned his project, it is alleged, from having met with a play on the same subject and fearing that his might be held

as a plagiarism. The thing is somewhat vaguely told by Bishop Gleig in Supplement to *Encyclopædia Britannica*; and Thomas Sommers discredits the intention, though on insufficient grounds. No play of the period on Wallace is known. I can only conjecture that he had somehow come across 'The Valiant Scot' of Bowyer (?), 1637, the valiant Scot being Wallace. There are *bits* in the long-forgotten play not without patriotic *verve*, but hardly of such quality as to have discouraged the most timorous from another attempt. But it is scarcely to be regretted that the two acts were suppressed. For his dramatic fragments — wherein Sisera is introduced—show that he had not mastered the laws of blank verse.

Looking back now upon the road we have traversed, we see there are certain things that demand our consideration if we would master at once a complex moral problem and the ultimate manifestation of his poetical faculty.

I have before stated that, in my judgment, it had been better for Robert Fergusson if Edinburgh rather than St. Andrews had been his University, and his home under his parents' roof-tree rather than in the bursar chamber of the latter city. I return on this.

St. Andrews at the period of Fergusson's residence, from 1765 to 1768, was fallen from its ancient glory. It was a sleepy and sordid place for so brilliant and effervescent a spirit. Notwithstanding the praises of it by no less a man than Defoe in his famous 'Tour,' it was a decaying and insanitary city. Only ale-houses abounded. That they did abound is certain; for even a decade and more later there were no fewer than two hundred and fifty in it—as sarcastically testifies Robert Heron in *his* 'Tour'—and others might be adduced. What society there was was stiff, ceremonial, unintellectual. We have proof on proof of this in Alexander Fergusson's Life of Henry Erskine and the Erskines—the two brothers having been, in fact, contemporary with Fergusson. The two brilliant boys found life extremely slow. Even their food was insufficient and, like the 'rabbits' of Fergusson's story, unvaried. These home-frugalities drew from the then juvenile Thomas Erskine (embryo Lord Chancellor) this among other waggish rhymes that our Poet might have fathered—

'Papa is going to London,
And what will we get then, oh?
But sautless kail and an old cow's tail,
And half the leg of a hen, oh!'

On the same trend of observation I have to accentuate that, as the accounts reveal, the bursar-students had an extremely generous daily and nightly allowance of ale, as well as at odd times from John Hogg the College 'porter, who was 'licensed' to supply ale and beer. No doubt at a time when tea was ten shillings, and sugar eleven shillings a pound, these luxuries could hardly have been expected by the lads. But will it be deemed too hard on the University authorities, if I express a suspicion that, as with the boy at Eton who became the great scholar Richard Porson, it may have been at the College that his thirst for nut-brown ale or beer, that drew him perchance over-frequently to Lucky Middlemist's and Johnnie Dowie's, originated?

Besides all this, Defoe found himself shut up severely to censure the ruinous and unclean condition of the class-rooms and students' apartments.

Chevalier Johnstone's vitriolic description of the place and people only a short time preceding Fergusson's coming, may be read now without passion—

'It [St. Andrews] was full of the accursed race of Calvinists, hypocrites who cover over their crimes with the veil of religion; fraudulent and dishonest in their dealings; who carry their holy dissimulation so far as to take off their bonnets to say grace when they take even a pinch of snuff; who have the name of God constantly in their mouths, and hell in their hearts. No town ever so much deserved the fate of Sodom and Gomorra' (*Memoirs*, 3rd ed., 1822).

I believe *the* safety-valve of Robert Fergusson to have been the friendship of Professor Dr. William Wilkie, noticed earlier. Wilkie must have been a noticeable man. He had all Dr. Samuel Johnson's bearish and boorish roughness exteriorly, but within—like Johnson—there beat one of the warmest and most sympathetic of human hearts. He had a biting tongue, and poured out volubly immense erudition, and did not relish contradiction or interruption. Charles Townshend, after witnessing a controversial encounter, pronounced him the most singular combination of god and brute he had ever met with. But

he softened to misfortune, melted to sorrow, guilelessly believed what was told him.

He 'took' to Robert Fergusson, and Robert Fergusson reciprocated. Their intercourse could not be otherwise than bracing and nurturing to the young student, but I do not know that he would be very fervent in seconding Fergusson's suspensive intention of becoming a minister of the gospel in the Kirk.[1]

I close our chapter of St. Andrews by noting two things. The first is that in 1767 — more than twelve months before expiry of the bursary terms—Robert Fergusson lost his good father. The Rev. Walter Macleod of the Register House was good enough to make search for me, and the search yielded this entry—

'1767. May 17. William Fergusson, Writer in Edinburgh: outside of Hay's burying-place: aged 53 years: died of an asthma.'

A second thing is that on leaving his room in the College he, like William Cowper on leaving Olney, inscribed his name behind the window-shutter.

'I discovered when at College,' wrote Professor William Tennant to me, 'in 1801, Robert Fergusson's name written with pencil in one of the small bedrooms of the old College-building, now in course of being demolished, that it may give place to a more elegant and convenient edifice.'

Robert Fergusson returned to his widowed mother in Warriston's Close, Edinburgh, without needing (I hope) to say or feel with his poetic ancestor, William Stewart, after his own 'fourteine zeirs,'

'Suppois I brocht richt litill awa' wi' me,'—

for I do not suppose that he would have agreed with Swift that 'a University is a place of learning where everyone brought something in, and took nothing out, hence it multiplies.'

[1] Since the text was written I have found among the Laing MSS. in the University of Edinburgh certain papers of Wilkie, and lo! his one vernacular poem, the fable of the 'Partan and the Hare,' I at once detected to be in Fergusson's well-known handwriting—a fact suggestive of intimacy and more. The racy footnotes I believe to have been also inspired by him.

CHAPTER VI

RETURN TO EDINBURGH FROM THE UNIVERSITY

'Auld Reekie! wale o' ilka toon
That Scotland kens beneath the moon.'
FERGUSSON.

LEAVING St. Andrews after his four sunny years at the University, he doubtless, as ANDREW LANG sings, saw sorrowfully, for the last time perchance—

'the long line of the violet hills
Beyond the yellow sand;
The wide brown level that the water fills
Between the sea and land;
The sea-bird's call and cry
On shining sands, or dry,
Along the foam-fringed mazes of the Bay.'
('The End of the Terms, St. Andrews,'
Grass of Parnassus, p. 59.)

His father, worthy William Fergusson, having died in 1767—as recorded in its place—it must have been with a heavy, not to say foreboding, heart that his younger son found himself again in the lowly dwelling in Warriston's Close, Edinburgh, though after all his narrow College-chamber—eight feet by four—could not be much in advance of that in Bell's Land. Whatever it was, his mother's house must be his home until his future career was determined. His mother, it is sadly certain, was left almost wholly unprovided for; nor was this a marvel on the slender annual income during her husband's lifetime that we have had revealed. We are not therefore surprised to discover that she sought to earn a scanty livelihood by taking in a lodger or lodgers into the spare room of her tenement. Shortly before, her elder son Hary had gone to sea.

The whole facts of the story as they emerge in scattered

notices of her go to indicate that Mrs. Fergusson was of the type of self-respecting Scotswomen later exemplified in Robert Nicoll's brave-hearted mother—instances that again make one proud of one's country. By many incidental touches it is clear she was of a 'proud spirit' in a good sense, and struggled on without complaint or fretting, and more than probably without communicating her straits to her well-to-do friends and factor-brother, though our early letters might well have made him surmise his sister's poverty and straits.

So long as his revered father lived, Robert Fergusson had gone forward from class to class, as before from school to University, fully occupied with each particular branch of academic learning and training, but still having for goal being a minister of the gospel in the Kirk of Scotland. When, however, in session 1767 tidings came first of his father's illness and next of his probably sudden death,—hastened, I suspect, by the exceptional severity of that year, a severity that also cut off much about the same time, in his twenty-first year, his poetic contemporary, Michael Bruce (died July 6, 1767),—things must have taken a different shape and aspect. As it had been by 'constraint, not willingly,'—spite of those hereditary sanctions and traditions before spoken of in c. ii.,—that he had carried on his studies for the Christian ministry, it was, I feel sure, with a sense of release and relief that he found himself free to abandon that imposed intention. It is not difficult to understand how it should have been such release and relief. There was, to begin with, the home-poverty of his widowed mother and the expiry of the Ferguson-Strathmartine bursary. These united to make it imperative that he should, as soon as might be, add to rather than diminish her 'living.' But it is plain that continuity of a theological course at Edinburgh or St. Andrews University of another four years—as required then and still by the Kirk—meant abstraction, not supplement. I do not doubt that his devoted mother would have gone with a will into sorest self-denials and toils to stand by her 'laddie's' purpose, had he so determined. Many, very many, Scottish parents and maiden aunts known to me have so done. But Robert Fergusson would suffer no such exaction. Then—not controversially or sectarianly but historically—the chilly atmosphere of Moderatism in

the Kirk of Scotland and the flagrant convivialities of the clergy could hardly fail to damp rather than kindle that enthusiasm which alone makes attractive the consecrated life of a minister of the gospel. Not only so, but behind all this there was a natural and irrepressible sprightliness, a liveliness of fancy, a flow and overflow of animal spirits, an abounding waggery, and, I must affirm, such a penetrative insight into and abhorrence of hypocrisy and mere professionalism, as combined to forewarn him that the preacher's gown and bands and the pulpit were neither suited for him nor he for them. Granted, that had he still adhered to his purpose he would only have done what too many then, and since, have done. But that was just what 'the bird in the bosom' would not permit *him* to do. He had a lofty ideal of the office of a Christian minister, and would inevitably shrink from becoming of the kidney of the clergy of the Kirk at that sorrowful period. It is simple historical fact once more that the leading clergy of the national Kirk—Blair, Robertson, 'Jupiter' Carlyle, Home, and the rest, except a very, very small minority of Evangelicals, and even some of them jovial fellows, *e.g.* Webster, 'a five-bottle man'—were Pagans, inferior in their ethics to Marcus Aurelius, Cicero, or Seneca. They were free-living, fast-living, broad-spoken; mere 'stipend-lifters' George Fox would have named them.

Fergusson's godly upbringing, and his father and mother's living out and up to the saintliest ideal, joined to his own thoroughness and veracity, demanded his pausing and ultimate surcease of all thought of becoming the Rev. Robert Fergusson, M.A. In the knowledge of Dr. David Irving's preposterous and inept moralising on this fact as on nearly all the facts of incident and accident in our Poet's short life, very amazing and amusing is his way of accounting for his abandonment of the ministry. It is too richly absurd to be withheld—

> 'The perpetual restraint which the sacred profession necessarily imposes was not at all agreeable to one of his turn of mind; and without submitting to this restraint, he knew he should expose himself to the anathemas of those who, on every occasion, stand prepared to wrest the vindictive thunder from the hands of omnipotence' (p. 6, 1806).

Fergusson would not have thanked his biographer for

such an apology. But no apology was needed. How easy it were to number up many and many 'brither Scots' who originally studied for the Kirk and fell away from their purpose! They go unblamed, why should Robert Fergusson be blamed?

Our Poet was thus left—like Robert Burns after the 1786–87 season in Edinburgh—'without an aim.' And yet it is unfair to the fatherless lad to think or say so. For an aim did offer itself to him—an aim reasonable, unambitious, and, other things being equal, possible.

This aim he must have formulated and prepared for with becoming promptitude. We have now to tell of the paling away of the bright hopes it kindled, the drizzling down into poor grey rain of the rainbow that spanned his horizon.

I take this to have been *the* turning-point in the young life before us, and hence I must narrate the FACTS in fulness and thoroughness.

His mother's brother,—who has already come before us,—Mr. John Forbes of the North, was prosperous, and be it noted then in 1768 not yet encumbered, as it has been pleaded to me, with his after large family by a second marriage—only one child being born at the time. He was relied on by mother and son to do something for his gifted and highly qualified nephew. By inheritance, as we saw, John Forbes had entered into possession of the farms of Templeton and Hillockhead and Wellhead and Round Lichnot, and, as the letters adduced show, other lands were leased and several estate-factorships acquired that brought him into closest personal relations with Northern nobility and gentry. Hence we are compelled to scrutinise and pronounce upon his character and conduct toward his sister—and such a sister—and toward his nephew—and such a nephew. He comes out badly from the outset. In c. ii. we saw that contemporaneously with his brother-in-law's 'abstract of annual expences,' showing it to be under £20, he exacted payment from him for the 'casks' of oatmeal sent to the Cap-and-Feather Close. Would it have been a prodigious stretch of liberality to have sent and re-sent this 'newest miln'd meal,' grown and grounded on his own farms, as a free gift? But no, it had to be paid for 'with

all costs.' Again, as we saw, when his brother-in-law lamented that his new situation only added £5 to his slender income, how deplorable was it in this well-to-do 'factor' to cast up his 'making light' of £25! I remind the reader of William Fergusson's quiet but manly repudiation of the heartless imputation. Then was it consistent with brotherly feeling—and again toward such a sister—that now in 1768, a year after her husband's death, he had left her—and I can think of no better or sufficiently poignant other word—to 'dree' out her widowhood in uttermost straits unhelped? Was it hoping against hope that his sister—uncomplaining, reticent—would not continue to go uncared for if only the actual facts were known at long last? Is it to be characterised as less than abominable that such a one as Bishop Gleig should have represented this going to his uncle as having 'an eye to some *sinecure* place'?

Here was a young man of indubitable natural ability, of trained and disciplined scholarship and culture, of a singularly alert and all-round capable intellect, and ready, as he was exceptionally qualified, to be employed through some sub-factorship to begin with. How could the man who had so variously provided for himself, so over-filled his own hands, expect anyone who knew the facts to accredit that he could not find or make an opening for his nephew, or invite his sister to 'settle' down near, if not with, him? I put these questions anticipatively. The sequel of our narrative shall vindicate this and vindicate my passion of statement.

Whether letters were exchanged and an invitation given to Fergusson, nowhere appears. But early in 1769—for he had only finally left St. Andrews in November 1768—he the second time proceeded North, and made his way to Round Lichnot, flushed with hope.

This visit, I reiterate, I regard as *the* most fundamental factor in Robert Fergusson's career. When I wrote my youthful Life of the Poet in 1850–1, I yielded my own judgment to the persuasive representations of the excellent grandson of Mr. John Forbes,—John Forbes, Esq., Writer, Old Meldrum,—and too readily accepted his statement of the matter. Later researches and subsequent possession of memoranda in his own handwriting that somehow he had

withheld until my book was published, and a more mature and critical insight into the facts and circumstances, have compelled me to come to the reluctant but inexorable conclusion that this uncle, behind all his reputed respectability, must have been a miserly, hard, cold, self-seeking, and unloveable man—a factor of the true 'Twa Dogs' type. In agreement with this we have now a miserable story to unfold and to put on record with righteous indignation.[1]

I will first of all take the original account by Dr. David Irving. This I do by preference, as it must have been long since seen he was about the last to be 'prejudiced' in favour of Fergusson. Here it is—

'He had an uncle living near Aberdeen, a Mr. John Forbes, who was in pretty affluent circumstances. To him he paid a visit, in hopes of procuring some suitable employment through his influence. Mr. Forbes at first treated him with civility; but, instead of exerting himself to promote his interest, suffered him to remain six months in his house, and then dismissed him in a manner which reflects very little honour on his memory. His clothes were beginning to assume a threadbare appearance; and on this account he was deemed an improper guest for his uncle's house. Filled with indignation at the unworthy treatment he had received, he retired to a little solitary inn which stood at a small distance; and having procured pen, ink, and paper, wrote him a letter full of the most manly sentiments. After his departure, Mr. Forbes began to relent, and despatched a messenger to him with a few shillings to bear his expenses upon the road. The paltry present, the lowness of his funds compelled him to accept. He set out for Edinburgh on foot, and at length reached his mother's house. The fatigues of the journey, added to the depression of his mind, had such an effect upon his delicate constitution, that for two or three days he was confined to bed' (*Life*, 1799—1800–1).

Thomas Sommers (1803) and Alexander Peterkin (1807) give very much the same narrative—the former denouncing the uncle's 'miserly behaviour,' and the latter using all manner of reprobating words; *e.g.*, 'a sordid worldling,' and 'his generous relative drove him from a house in which I think Robert Fergusson would have been an illustrious guest although in rags.'

[1] I must state that the Forbes MSS. sent me included a sheaf of letters from his employers that attest more than appreciation of him, really warm friendship. So that I do not at all question John Forbes's integrity and business capacity. But these very intimacies and regards only aggravate his failure to find a post for his nephew.

Without appropriating either the vituperation or the heroics of these early biographers, I must accentuate that each wrote from personal information furnished by the family of Fergusson, and in Sommers's case by Fergusson himself. Because of this solid and indisputable authentication Hugh Miller, who personally assured me repeatedly that his 'Recollections' were based on careful and prolonged personal investigation, wrought the incident with finest touches into his *Recollections of Robert Fergusson*; and Mr. Alexander Gordon, in his admirable Study of his Life and Works, has with much skill woven in all the threads of circumstance and character. These would take too much of our waning space; but I place the references below,[1] limiting myself to one authenticated anecdote, viz. that young Fergusson was accustomed to assemble the servants who had been detained from public worship, and taking his stand at the mouth of the peat-stack, would address them for an hour at a time in language so eloquent and fervid that Mr. Forbes (the Poet's cousin) distinctly remembered to have often seen them bathed in tears (Forbes MSS.).

All this having been so, it is impossible to dismiss the end and issue of this visit, as the descendants of this uncle attempted to do, as mere hearsay; but this, in so far as I am concerned, does not involve doubt of the veracity of John Forbes's grandson, my correspondent, in the statement he gave me. A *contretemps* of boyish mischievousness and thoughtlessness in the Round Lichnot wood I accepted and accept as the occasion of summary dismissal and departure. I concede further that it must have been annoying and provocative of hot words to the very 'proper' and pompous factor-gentleman in the special circumstances of his high-placed guests. But the damning truth remains that, when it would have been no great stretch of fraternal generosity to have invited his widowed sister to some small cottage at Round Lichnot or Forrester-hill, with some little help in addition to her own native industry, he never did so invite. Again, the fact that the 'threadbare' or 'shabby clothes' offended his sense of respectability suggests that surely he might have called in the village tailor to provide

[1] Miller's collected *Tales and Sketches*; Gordon in *Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 277.

his nephew with a suit of clothes. Was that too prodigious an expenditure to be thought of? Was his 'respectability' not value for the shillings it should have demanded? Once more—the fine thing of young Fergusson preaching at the peat-stack mouth with such pathos and power that even the hard-headed Aberdonians were melted to tears compels the interrogatory, whether that ought not and might not have dictated to the uncle a resolution to send his nephew forthwith to the College of Aberdeen and to pay his way to completing his theological education and ultimate licence as a preacher of the gospel? I believe that the cost was a large determining element in leading Fergusson to abandon the Kirk. Consequently I have a conviction that had his uncle only come forward and said, 'Your father is gone, and your mother has not the means, but I shall come good for your education—go, and God bless you,' in combination with his mother's wistful wish, might have decided him to return to his allegiance.

I have also to state now that, shortly after the publication of my volume of 1851, Mr. Forbes of Old Meldrum asked my acceptance of a MS. volume entitled 'Trifles light as air by the deceased Johnny Grotts, now first published by his son, Sir John Barleycorn, Bart.' (1802). I was more than surprised to find in this volume not only a paper entitled 'Reflections on reading the Life of Fergusson by David Irving, A.M.,' and a second or pseudo-memoir of Johnny Grotts, entitled 'Life of Johnny Grotts in the manner of David Irving, A.M.,' but that with all this vituperation and not unjustifiable blame of Irving there is no attempt at disproof of the facts stated by Dr. Irving about this visit. This is the more noticeable inasmuch as he had attempted such disproof, or rather denied that it was other than gossip, but on second thoughts apparently even this attempt is crossed out by its writer himself. Self-evidently he saw that it would not do to risk contradiction of so well-authenticated a matter. All he leaves is this most unsatisfactory sentence: 'This maternal uncle of Fergusson is much out of the reach of injury from authors of Irving's respectability' (p. 125). He refers to the Inverarity 'Strictures' in the *Scots Magazine*, but these papers do not gainsay the story of the visit. It must be

added that Mr. Forbes is loud in laudation of Fergusson, and breaks into rhyme—

> 'So Irving works his way;
> Like prowling tiger, see him crawl along,
> To seize some vot'ry of the bowl and song;
> His whetted tusks and shiv'ring fangs proclaim
> Death to the Bard who dares to grasp at Fame.
> But vain his efforts—feeble as his pen;
> His work shall perish, not a wreck remain;
> The deathless Fergusson his art defies,
> Whilst Irving's phantom shall adorn—hot pies.'

These follow lines in the key of Sommers's protest against Irving's holding up of a 'boy' for reprobation as if he had been a 'hoary-headed sinner.' All clear enough and creditable, but unluckily it yields not an atom of disproof of the uncle's mean and callous conduct.

On minor things I insert a few sentences; *e.g.* I was told by Mr. Forbes that there never was an 'inn' near Round Lichnot, whereas there was such an inn. This, too, is crossed out in the MS. Then there is no hint or memorandum in all these papers of the alleged after-visits of Mrs. Fergusson, which Mr. Forbes in his natural eagerness to defend his grandfather sent me, and which I too trustingly accepted in 1850–1 as evidence that she had not felt that her brother had ill-used either herself or her son. I have no reason to believe in such after-visits or friendship. Contrariwise, it is certain that she never forgot or could forget her brother's absolute failure to befriend her and her son in such a crisis. No single scrap of her writing was among all the Forbes MSS., an incredible thing had there been either visit or renewal of broken friendship.

It fires my blood to-day to think how John Forbes acted on and on to the tragical end. As we shall learn sorrowfully, even when that tragedy fell, the poor mother was so abjectly poor that she had no choice but to allow her 'child of genius' to be removed to the pauper-Bedlam! It thus lies on the surface that John Forbes continued to the bitter end unbrotherly, penurious, and callous; and that his sister was of the true old-fashioned Scottish independent spirit and disdained to make further appeal.

Dr. Robert Chambers stands alone in seeking to traverse

the verdict against the uncle. It always goes against the grain in me to say one word derogatory or depreciatory, or even corrective of this leal-hearted Scot; for he was a very much more intellectual man than those who look down upon him and ignorantly undervalue his books. I deem it, therefore, only fair to reproduce his defence—

'The behaviour of Mr. Forbes in the matter just related, has been reprobated as ungenerous in the extreme. But it seems questionable whether the censure be merited in its full extent. Every man is no doubt bound to assist his fellow-men, and more particularly those who are connected with his own family, or have other claims to his patronage, as far as lies in his power. But it is difficult to fix the limits to which his exertions ought in any particular case to be carried. It may seem very clear to everyone at the present day, that Fergusson was a man of genius, and ought to have been promoted to some office which might have conferred independence, at the same time that it left him leisure for the cultivation of his literary talents. This was, however, by no means so apparent at the period to which we refer, nor perhaps at any future period during the poet's lifetime. He presented himself in his uncle's house, an expectant of favour, but his expectations might not to any ordinary-minded person appear very reasonable. He was a young man that had addicted himself to the profitless occupation of rhyming: who could tell he was to render himself eminent by it? He could not submit his mind to common business, and had aversions that did not appear to rest on any feasible foundation, to certain employments which were proposed to him; and when we consider to how close a scrutiny it is reasonable that those who solicit patronage should be prepared to submit, it does not seem wonderful that he should have been regarded as a young man who was disposed to remain idle, and that his friends should have been discouraged from using their influence in behalf of one who did not seem willing to do what he could for himself. We know few of the circumstances that took place during Fergusson's residence with his uncle, and it is unjust to deal out reproaches so much at random' (*Eminent Scotsmen, s.n.*).

It requires only to recall the facts and to disentangle a perfect jumble of their chronology, to set all this uncharacteristically ungenerous special pleading aside. The worst thing about it is that whilst defending 'reproaches at random,'—reproaches that are not 'at random,' but based on authenticated facts,—this extenuation of John Forbes's conduct is based on 'random reproaches' of Fergusson and Fergusson's defenders that have not a shadow of foundation.

To begin with, Fergusson hastened North within a few weeks of closing his attendance at the University, which we

saw took place formally in December 1768. Did this look like the irresolution with which he is charged? More than that—this setting out in mid-winter of a delicate lad (turned seventeen) indicates not aimlessness but aim, and not unwillinghood to be employed but eagerness to find employment.

Then the chronology of statement is utterly wrong. The alleged proposals for employment that he is made hypothetically to reject, and which rejection is further alleged to have proved him 'unwilling to submit his mind to common business and a wish to remain idle' came *after* the visit, not preceding—as we shall see in our next chapter. Besides, the very fact that he had almost *instanter* gone North to his uncle, in the perfect knowledge of this uncle's abundant functions, demonstrated his preparedness and eagerness to 'submit his mind to common business,' and to exert himself to his utmost toward earning a living for himself and his beloved mother. As to having engaged in the 'profitless occupation of rhyming' it is an outrage on all amenities of criticism to so over-magnify his college little skits and satires and to make them antedate that poetic outburst that did not come until two full years after the visit—as shall also appear.

Sorrowfully, therefore, but with a clear and clean conscience, I pronounce John Forbes, Esq., of Templeton, Hillockhead, Wellhead, Round Lichnot, Forrester-hill, and at least four factorships, to have been mean-souled and hard. Hugh Miller has come before us in our narrative. How differently did *his* two uncles—'Sandy' and 'James'—act towards him!

The ugly thing therefore must stand. Nor is it hazarding too much to say that John Forbes, gentleman-farmer, should have said Amen to Elia's wise fooling on 'Poor Relations':—

'A poor relation is the most irrelevant thing in nature—a piece of impertinent correspondency—an odious approximation—a haunting conscience—a preposterous shadow lengthening on the noontide of our prosperity—an unnatural remembrancer—a perpetually recurring mortification—a drain on your purse—a more intolerable dun upon your pride—a drawback upon your success—a rebuke to your rising—a stain on your blood—a blot on your 'scutcheon,' etc. etc. (*Last Essays*).

The early biographers state that on recovering from the fatigues and sickliness of his long foot-journey from the North, Fergusson soothed his injured feelings by composing his English poems entitled 'The Decay of Friendship' and 'Against Repining at Fortune.' Bishop Gleig, as before, finds the unhappy visit reflected in them; and so Irving and Sommers and others. I cannot but think this most improbable. Had these flat and commonplace productions been so inspired (but inspiration there is none), they must have shown some passion as well as sensibility, or I will put it bluntly—temper. Our Poet did not lack a pungent vocabulary. He could be stinging. But these two poems are as stingless as drone bees, and bear evidence on the surface of a wholly different set of circumstances.

CHAPTER VII

HOME AGAIN—DRUDGERY

'Fortune's cauld and changefu' ee
Gloomed bitterly on mine and me.'

WILLIAM THOM.

WHEN footsore and sicker at heart than even in body Robert Fergusson again crossed the threshold of his mother's humble dwelling in 'Jamieson's Land,' it must have been in weariness of spirit and as looking out on a grey and windy sky. We can conceive her as cut to the heart by her brother's treatment of her 'laddie,' but too natively strong and self-reliant to give way to either complaint or murmuring. I very much mistake my reading of the incidental notices that we gather from her son's early biographers if she did not also impart to him something of her own indomitable brave-heartedness. She was godly after the finest type of old-fashioned Scottish godliness. My own words return upon me. Her watchword under all disappointment, darkness, vanishing of hopes, and ceaseless toil, beyond all question would be that of the apostle, 'All things work together for good to them that love God;' and she gave the supreme evidence of that 'love' whereon the 'good' is conditioned — a gracious and beautiful life of faith and hope and love. It is a joy to me even at this far-on day to remember the emotion with which that delightful example of the old Scottish gentlewoman — the venerable Miss Ruddiman — always spoke of mother and son, and not less tenderly of the former than the latter. 'She was a *good* woman,' was her emphatic testimony.

His return from the North was a crisis in Fergusson's young life. There was lifelong peril if a decision were not

arrived at toward earning 'daily bread.' For it abides true to-day as when Chaucer wrote in his 'Troilus'—

> 'For to every wight some goodly aventure
> Som tyme is shape, if he can it receyven;
> And if that he wol take of it no cure
> When that it cometh, but wilfully it weyven,
> Lo! neither eas nor fortune him deceyven,
> But right his verray slouthe and wrechednesse
> And such a wight is for to blame, I gesse.'

'Wrechednesse' assuredly, but no 'slouthe,' belonged to Fergusson.

I fear that it would be vain to acquit him of temporary irresolution, of infirmity of will, of day-dreaming. But these are just the things which circumstance controls. Psychologically, in estimating character, I hold that it is as illogical as it is unkind to 'blame'—Chaucer's word—a man of genius for his temperament. As well 'blame' a man who has lost his legs that he cannot be a cavalry soldier, or any victim of any physical loss or defect that he is unable to fulfil the functions for which the missing limbs or faculties are the appointed instruments, as 'blame' Fergusson that he had aversions in relation to preparatory studies and life-tasks that were suggested to him. We have no such blame for the physical; why for the mental or moral?

This is our next point of departure needing right setting; for here Irving and the sorry crew of moralisers have again poisoned and misled judgment.

On his return—I re-emphasise that it was on return and not before it—from his visit to his uncle, it was proposed that he should turn his academic training to account by attending medical classes at Edinburgh University. His answer was that he could not, for when he read or thought of diseases he seemed to feel as if every one of them were assailing him. Fantastic? Yes, it has been ridiculed; and yet as matter of fact, identically the same thing is recorded of one of whom few will be fools enough to laugh—the illustrious scholar and divine, John Bois, D.D., one of the leading translators of our Authorised Version of Holy Scripture. His biographer thus writes of him—

> 'He once proposed to have imployed his Studies in Physick; to which End hee purchased many Books in that Faculty. Till in

Reading of them he was conceited, that whatsoever Disease he read of, he was troubled with the same himself. By which sickness of the Brain, it pleased God to cure the Church of the Want of so good a Member as he afterwards proved' (Peck).

It were easy to multiply similar parallels. Fergusson was of too sickly a constitution to overcome his sensations and revulsions. But besides this, where was the money to come from during the long probation? I think of the hardships in the medical-preparations of Goldsmith and of Smollett; and 'Gideon Gray' in the *Surgeon's Daughter* also comes in mind.

So with LAW. It is stated by his early biographers, *e.g.* Thomas Ruddiman and Irving, that he was not only invited but induced to attempt legal studies, but that he speedily gave up the attempt. Such alleged abandonment was vindicated on the ground that so 'dry and barren a study as law was wholly improper' for one so tremulous with sensibility and so impulsive. Whereupon good Bishop Gleig proves to his own satisfaction by *certes* very original examples, that poetical genius is not at all incongruous with legal studies. I daresay he was right in the fact, but fancy the great lawyer-judge Mansfield and the famous Bishop of Rochester (Atterbury) being selected as proofs that they could have been poets *if* they had chosen! I grant that the defence of Fergusson on the plea that Law was too 'dry' was a poor one. But the real reason—as with Medicine and Theology—lay deeper. Again one inevitably asks and re-asks, suppose Fergusson to have acquiesced, where were to be got the means of support during the interval?

As to his not being prepared to submit to the necessary 'drudgery,' the weary, dreary, wearing drudgery to which he did submit forthwith, vindicates him, and proves how unrighteous and unsympathetic and un-understanding are the misjudgments stated. Hence I have a remorseful feeling for having quoted Chaucer. For if his wight's 'wrechednesse' was all too certainly due to *his* 'slouthe,' that could not be laid to Fergusson's charge, as we have seen.

I plead with every kindly reader to hold in recollection my psychological problem and also the breadth of shadow that must have fallen athwart heart and hearth from the

shattering of his golden hopes from, it cannot be too often iterated, his well-advantaged uncle.

With reference to Dr. Robert Chambers's proleptic data that I have had to confute, I again place in the forefront that it was on coming back to Edinburgh that these theological, medical, and legal propositions were made to Fergusson, and that while multiplied things were suggested, no hand was reached out to enable him to go in for any one of them all. The stern necessity of earning a living wage (apart from inevitable aversions) put them out of the question.

So far from wishing to remain 'idle,' or being 'unwilling to help himself,' the whole facts go to establish that he must instantly have addressed himself to find employment. At this distance of time and in our dim light we write under disadvantage in not knowing the efforts which he made, but, placing this and that together, it is certain that he was early in the summer of 1769, and therefore within a few weeks of recovery from his feverish fatigue on reaching home from the North, actually earning a scanty but real wage, very much as his poor struggling father had done in addition to his posts with Walter Fergusson and the British Linen Company. Friends of his deceased father came to that rescue which his uncle had withheld—one in particular, as the Inverarity MSS. showed me, his father's employer, the just re-named Walter Ferguson; and another—still more important and influential, Charles Abercrombie, Esq., Depute Commissary-Clerk of the Commissary-Clerk's office, Edinburgh.

This Mr. Abercrombie was of a clerical family from William Fergusson's own parish of Tarland, his father the parish minister; and it was pleasant to me to come on this recognition of birthplace ties. Nevertheless, and while grateful to both these Edinburgh citizens, it is pitiful to think that the richly-gifted son had so to follow in his father's footsteps, footsteps literally, by becoming a clerk and copyist of legal papers—by the latter gaining his father's designation of 'Writer' and Burns's immortal phrase, 'the Writer chiel, a deathless name.'

Those who have ignominiously laughed — and to his shame our revered Dr. Samuel Johnson did it—at John

Milton's taking up a small private school on his high-hearted hastened return from Italy, that he might be at the post of danger in his country's troubles, may jeer and sneer at Robert Fergusson's occupation. The man who is a man will not jeer.

The Commissary-Clerk's office, which proved to be Fergusson's only permanent post till the close of his brief life, belonged to what are known as the Commissary Courts. These were set up both in Edinburgh and the provinces after the Reformation, to take the place of the old ecclesiastical courts. Their special functions related to all that concerned marriage, divorce, legitimacy, and wills; besides which bonds and other deeds were recorded in the Commissary office for execution, just as in the Court of Session and Sheriff Courts—the Church courts having of old been in the habit of enforcing civil claims by Church censures.

The Commissary Records consist of three main branches, the Register of Testaments, of Deeds, and of Legal Decreets. I have recently gone over the 'Deeds,' and found many and many a folio page beautifully and flawlessly written by Fergusson. I designate one very good example. Decreet for Declarator of Marriage Adherence and Aliment Mary Galloway against David Laidlaw, 13 Sept^{r}. 1769, 12 Cases (Vol. xii. 1769–71).

A paper printed in a recent number of the *Scottish Antiquary* (1897) states that in 1741 the Commissary Clerkship of Edinburgh was divided between two persons, each of them getting about £200 a year, and that the Commissary-Clerk Depute got about £100 a year. The amounts cannot be stated precisely, as they consisted of fees paid for registration or by litigants, and not salaries at all. These summary details—for which I am mainly indebted to J. Maitland Thomson, Esq., M.A., Advocate—reveal how mechanical and monotonous must have been our Poet's duties while—in Charles Lamb's phrase—he underwent 'the daily drudgery at the desk's dead wood,' while the £100 income of the Deputy-Clerk's office goes far to mitigate our attitude toward his meagre payment of Fergusson.

The Commissary-Clerk's office was situated in Parliament

Close—using the term here as in English cathedral closes—so that the whole characters and ongoings of the Court of Session were hourly day by day beneath our Poet's eyes. Angellier, in his for a Frenchman semi-miraculous *Burns*, has worked in mainly from Fergusson's 'Rising' and 'Sitting' of the Session, the 'Daft Days,' 'Leith Races,' and other vernacular poems, a finely realistic picture of the then streets of Edinburgh, whilst the etchings of John Kay and Walter Geikie enable us to see the very 'form and pressure' of the scenes and to realise how true as any Dutch painter to the life are Fergusson's presentations. But the very brilliance and animation of the after-poetry makes it, so to say, *de trop* to return on his wage-earning employment. That employment, as must by this time be recognised, was miserably inferior to Fergusson's abilities and culture, but the daily spectacle of his slaving and impoverished mother left him no choice. And so with the exception of a few months at similar duties in the Sheriff-Clerk's office, which as soon as possible he left from being distressed by the perpetual issuing there of executions of sale, the Commissary-Clerk's office proved to be his stated and only source of regular bread-winning. I say 'regular,' as meaning certain, because in addition Mr. Abercrombie and others were accustomed to employ him in copying legal and other papers of his and their private practice. What his salary or weekly wage in the Commissary-Depute's office was, I have failed to discover; but I am about to produce pathetic documentary proof of the financial meagreness of recompense for his extra-copying and writing of letters, etc., for any who applied. He began his duties for Mr. Abercrombie by making a fair transcript—just as he had done with Professor William Wilkie's lectures—of the great official Register, *id est* an elaborate record of all its transactions.

The following extracts from memoranda, which Fergusson has entered in the blank leaves of the MS. of his father's Book of Rates, sufficiently and touchingly indicate the nature of his additional employments and their product—the double fact reminding us of on the one hand the illustrious Jonathan Edwards of America writing his great sermons on all manner of odds and ends and saved scraps of paper, and on the

other of poor Chatterton's almost contemporaneous cynical notes of his slender literary gains, as touchingly told by Skeat, Wilson, and Masson. The entries are headed Memoranda.

I. RECORD.

	£	s	d
Decreet of divorce, Pirie g. Backie, 30	0	3	1½
Decreet adherence, Galloway g. Laidlas, 24	0	2	6
Decreet divorce, Rt. Keil g. White, 12	0	1	3
Divorce, Paterson g. Ramsay, 9	0	0	11½
Divorce, Chalmers against Marr, 50	0	5	2½
	£0	13	0
Decreet divorce, Thomson g. Laurie, 22		2	7½
	£0	15	7½

II. CASH ACCOUNT.

	£	s	d
For writing depositions	£0	2	0
For do.	0	1	0
For registering protests	0	0	6½
For writing an infeftement	0	2	6
For an eik	0	1	0
For writing answer to the petition, James Sim	0	0	6
	£0	7	6½

Edinburgh, 11th October 1770.

For a testament, umql. Daniel M'Don	0	0	9
For a testament, umql. Adam Edmond	0	1	6

III.

For a testament, umql. James Veitch	0	2	0
For transcribing an account	0	0	6
	£0	4	9
	0	7	8½
Amount of Cash, 18th October 1770	£0	12	5½
Received for the Record	0	13	0
	£1	5	5½
	0	8	6
	£1	13	11½

IV.

For writing Brodie's inventory, 1s.
For a sheet of stamp paper, 1s. in part.
For do., 1s.
For writing Euphemia Dalrymple's testament, 1s. 6d.

V.

Testament testamentar, umql. Alexander Veitch, 14.
Testament testamentar, umql. Adam Edmond, 10, Pd.
Testament dative, umql. Lilias Weir, 5, Pd.
Testament dative, umql. Alexander Veitch, 16s.

VI.

Testament dative, umq[l]. Euphemia Dalrymple.
Test[t]. dative, Margar. Duncan, 14.
Test[t]. dative, Captain Waulker, 6.
Test[t]. dative, John Mowatt, 27.
Test[t]. testamentar, Agnes Brash, 12.
Test[t]. testamentar, Skirving, 13.
Test[t]. test[t]. Marion Hogg, 10.
Test[t]. dative, James Cairnes.

(*Works*, 1851, pp. lxxiii–iv.)

These are dry figures, but to me they gleam with pathos. Think of the farthing, 11½d.! For they go to re-demonstrate how far astray was Mr. Ruddiman when he moralised that 'a genius so lively could not submit to the drudgery of the dry and sedentary profession of the Law.'

The preceding memoranda establish that he must have mastered the legal terms and forms necessary to the preparation of the testaments and other legal documents; and over against the charge of not submitting to drudgery I write large, what drudgery could have been more irksome, more exacting than his routine employment and those after office-hours copyings, etc.? How offensive and hard again is Bishop Gleig's inflation of the earlier mis-observations!—'Mr. Fergusson, with many amiable qualities, was so utterly destitute of mental vigour that rather than submit to what his friends call drudgery, he seemed to have looked with a wistful eye to some sinecure place.' Which being interpreted means either of two things—that he had gone to his uncle not really wishing employment—a proved falsehood—or that given an opportunity and means to study the Law he would not apply himself or submit to the necessary labour—a pure fiction. Then, in the teeth of the facts, Mr. Ruddiman's unlucky term of 'drudgery' is flung back on him, unmindful of and untouched by the actual ceaseless and monotonous and miserably under-paid toil to which without break he gave himself for the term of his short natural life. No. Robert Fergusson was never given a chance of reaching a position worthy of him. And so day in and day out he was thankful and strenuously diligent to the last in copying law papers and anything, anything that offered for 'daily bread.'

In the knowledge of these FACTS I would have my readers keep a grip of this certainty—that he 'kept' himself reputably to the close, and never appeared other than well-dressed and gentlemanly, never ceasing to share his every shilling with his ageing and beloved mother, ay, and with the poor in the street or in his 'close'—as is universally testified. Surely this historic-biographic FACT and reminder ought to crush the calumny of unsubmissiveness to drudgery and looking 'with a wistful eye to some sinecure place'? Truly and penetratively observes one of his anonymous biographers, 'Like others whom accident has thrown into a course of life contrary to their inclination, he was prevented by the pressure of daily necessity from adventuring on a better' (Boy's *Lives of Scots*).

> 'Alone the oar he plied, the rapids nigh;
> To pause but for a moment was to die.'

It is the more necessary to keep before the mind and heart and conscience of the reader Fergusson's unfailing attendance and attention to his weary task-work, his inevitable punctuality to the very second at the successive hours, and his unbroken friendship with the head of his office, Mr. Abercrombie,—a gentleman who, it must be recorded, while of great worth, was notoriously peppery, irritable, exacting of hard work, as being himself a relentless worker,—because an anecdote has passed from biographer to biographer that broadens out a single escapade of a single day into a generalisation of his habitual attitude toward his office-duties.

The venerable Miss Ruddiman over and over assured me that, while unquestionably he felt these duties to be irksome and beneath his qualifications, and would sometimes speak of his 'aching fingers,' he nevertheless was punctiliously regular and systematic in going to the office and during his office hours, so much so that she had been told that his rounding of the corner in proceeding to the Commissary-Depute's office was taken by the neighbours as better surety of the hour than the Tron Kirk bell. Only o' nights, when his day's duties had been discharged, did he feel free to scribble, as he jocosely called it. More than that, my aged friend maintained—as I have already argued

—that the fact alone that through five years he succeeded in satisfying old Mr. Charles Abercrombie and his successor was proof positive that there was no ground for complaint. 'Mr. Robert,' she would say, 'was a great favourite with Mr. Abercrombie, as with everybody, and always took in good part good advice given him.' In recollection of these things it demands restraint of passion to make room for the self-confuting anecdote referred to. As I daresay it may be held obligatory on a biographer to preserve it, I give it from Chambers, and shall thereafter show its contradictions.

'The following anecdote has been related for the purpose of showing the irksomeness of the poet under his usual avocations. In copying out the extract of a deed one forenoon, he blundered it two different times, and was at length obliged to abandon the task without completing it. On returning in the evening, he found that the extract had been much wanted, and he accordingly sat down with great reluctance to attempt it a third time. He had not, however, half accomplished his task, when he cried out to his office companion, that a thought had just struck him which he would instantly put into verse and carry to Ruddiman's *Magazine* (on the eve of publication), but that he would instantly return and complete the extract. He immediately scrawled out the following stanza on one Thomas Lancashire, who after acting the gravedigger in Hamlet and other such characters on the Edinburgh stage, had set up a public-house, in which he died—

> "Alas! poor Tom! how oft with merry heart
> Have we beheld thee play the Sexton's part!
> Each comic heart must now be grieved to see
> The Sexton's dreary part performed on thee."

On his return towards the office, he called at the shop of his friend Sommers, printseller and glazier, in the Parliament Close, where he found a boy [Robert Aikman, shop-boy] reading a poem on the Creation. This circumstance furnished him with the point of another epigram, which he immediately scribbled down and left for Mr. Sommers's perusal. These proceedings occupied him about twenty minutes, and he then returned to his drudgery' (*Eminent Scotsmen, s.n.*).

This narrative carries on the face of it improbability, or rather impossibility. For example, the office never was opened in the evening. The epigram sent on the 'eve of publication' was not inserted as a postscript, but in its own place with the poetry as ordinarily. The epigram on Sommers came a good while subsequent to that on Lancashire, as he himself tells us, with no connection whatever with the other. I add that Robert Fergusson never

'scribbled' or 'scrawled.' I have seen a good deal of his writing, and like his father's it is invariably neat and careful. Finally, the Thomas Lancashire epigram did not appear in Ruddiman's *Magazine* until April 16th, 1772, or fully two, nearer three years subsequent to his entering the Commissary-Depute's office—and so all that interval had passed without any such escapade. Nor had he written or published any poetry until February 14, 1771.

But whilst I reject this anecdote I am far from being reluctant to admit that some manifestations of impatience with his dreary work may have furnished some tiny modicum of fact to it. Yet, allowing 'pranks' of the sort, it is monstrous to expand and generalise so as to leave the impression that Fergusson was so flighty and unbusiness-like that he did not lend himself to his duties.

Contemporaneous with his return to Edinburgh, Fergusson formed an acquaintance with several players and musicians —as I learned from the Ruddiman MSS. An early fruit of this intercourse was a close friendship with Mr. Woods, a favourite actor of the Edinburgh boards, and a man of unblemished character as a private citizen. More suggestive still—as it was my privilege first to publish—TENDUCCI became equally his friend—that TENDUCCI who first directed the attention of George Thomson to the Scottish melodies, and so indirectly became the originator of his great work, and deeper, the securer of the enthusiastic allegiance of Robert Burns. It is to be here recorded that to the opera of 'Artaxerxes,' which was produced in 1769 with many attractions in the Theatre Royal, Edinburgh, Fergusson contributed three songs. This was his first appearance as an author. Here is the title-page—

'Artaxerxes, an English Opera, as it is performed at the Theatre Royal, Edinburgh. The Music composed by Tho. Aug. Arne. Mus. Doc. With the addition of Three Favourite Scots Airs. The words by Mr. R. Fergusson. Edinburgh: Printed by Martin and Wotherspoon. MDCCLXIX. Price Sixpence.'

This is none other than a wretchedly poor translation of Metastasio's beautiful play of the name; and I must allow our Poet's three songs are equally inane. Only the 'three favourite Scots airs' and Mr. and Madame Tenducci's singing and an excellent company could have won the

amazing popularity that contemporary notices make clear was sustainedly won. The Scots airs were 'Braes of Ballenden,' for which blind Dr. Blacklock wrote just about as poor a song as this; 'Roslin Castle,' of which Sir Walter wrote in *Redgauntlet*, 'Here's another, "Roslin Castle"; it's no' a Scots tune, but it passes for one. Oswald made it himself, I reckon. He has cheated mony a ane, but he canna cheat Wandering Willie.' But for once Scott was wrong. Oswald did not compose the tune. The third air was 'Lochaber no more,' one of Allan Ramsay's best songs, and according to Hogg's *Jacobite Relics* (ii. 434), the song sung in the prison of Linlithgow by Dr. Archibald Cameron of Lochiel.

None of these three songs was reclaimed by Fergusson for his volume of 1773 or the *Magazine*. The mystery is that the sweet-singer of the 'Lea Rig' and the racy singer of the ballad-song of 'Hallowfair' could perpetrate such trash and seek to displace Ramsay by his 'wersh' conventionalisms. Before passing on, it may be mentioned that when Tenducci, long years after Fergusson's death, spoke of him he broke down and burst into tears.

The fact that Fergusson was asked, so early as 1769, to furnish these songs for 'Artaxerxes,' gives assurance that his poetic gift was known, while their being sung by the Tenduccis could hardly fail to put his name in men's mouths. True, it was a change for the umquhile student in divinity to be thus associated with players and stage singers. But let it be remembered he had unmistakably announced his abandonment of the sacred calling.

Mr. J. C. Dibdin, the historian of the Scottish Stage, informs me that Fergusson had a special private box near the stage, that he might come and go as he chose, and that he was often melted to tears. Miss Ruddiman also informed me that she was present at one performance of 'Artaxerxes' with the Poet, and remembered how he blushed when his name was applauded. She further said he had a peculiar method of expressing his applause by raising his right hand and bringing it down with a clap.

We have now reached the highest level of Robert Fergusson's life — his advent as a vernacular poet. This must have a chapter to itself.

CHAPTER VIII

ADVENT AS A VERNACULAR POET—A 'NEW NOTE'

'Harp of the North . . .
Silent be no more. Enchantress, wake again.'
SCOTT.

I HAVE named the point at which we have arrived, the highest level of Fergusson's young life, and my other words, 'his advent as a vernacular poet,' will justify me to all who know. For in 1772 a new light broke upon him, comparable at a distance with that which darted across the shrouded horizon of Robert Burns when Dr. Thomas Blacklock's letter came to his knowledge and sent him from Mossgiel to Edinburgh.

As we saw, he had flung off satires in Macaronic and other mother-tongued verse while at St. Andrews, that have perished, and one—the Elegy on Professor David Gregory—not likely to perish, so that he had 'imp'd his wing for flight' into the empyrean of Scottish song—if the term be not too exalted. Yet it *is* the lark that 'soars and sings' in the wide light-drenched skies.

Except in the little Ode of Horace and the Elegy, we have no examples of his boyish verse, and can only guess at the quality of some from flaws pointed out in them by his clear-headed brother Hary. The most remarkable thing about them is that, having written the Horatian Ode and the Elegy, he seems to have missed seeing for the time that there lay *the* vein that he was destined to work. That he had not yet wholly found himself, though Scotia's Muse had found him, lies on the surface. For following the three very poor songs in 'Artaxerxes,' wherein he was self-evidently unconscious of the opportunity laid to his hand in the 'three famous Scots airs' to employ the rich and racy vernacular of Allan Ramsay and Hamilton of Gilbertfield as in the Elegy on Gregory, came as his first really published verse,

English pieces of the most conventional type. This blunder, for blunder it was, remained unrectified until, as I have said, the opening of 1772.

In the *Weekly Magazine* of the Ruddimans—rival of the *Scots Magazine*, that had grown somnolent and 'dry and *dreich*'—of February 7th, 1771, there appeared this note under Poetry—

'We have been favoured with three Pastorals, under the titles of Morning, Noon, and Night, written by a young gentleman of this place, the stile of which appears as natural and picturesque as that of any of the modern ones hitherto published.'

This note is prefixed to 'Pastoral I. Morning,' and there followed on February 14th, 'Pastoral II. Noon,' and on February 21st, 'Pastoral III. Night,' still anonymously.

These Pastorals are scarcely in a single element above contemporary namby-pamby known as pastorals that were just about being flagellated by Erskine—far-off echoes of Pope and Gay and John Cunningham.

The laudation of them, notwithstanding, in the note, might well have misled the youthful Poet to continue in the same strain, and so compliments have proved the flattering bane of his poetic life by capturing him to furnish what was—wanted.

But fortunately the ill-judged laudation did not seduce Robert Fergusson. Nothing further was contributed to the *Weekly* till the autumn of 1771, or about six months subsequent to the Pastorals. Then appeared 'A Saturday's Expedition: in mock heroicks' (August 1st), duly signed 'R. Fergusson.' This was followed on September 19th by the already-named 'Decay of Friendship: a pastoral elegy.' In the next month, October 10th, came 'Lines written at the Hermitage of Braid, near Edinburgh.' This, too, was signed 'R. Ferguson'—a single 's' in this single instance. On November 21st there appeared another burlesque, 'A Burlesque Elegy on the Amputation of a Student's Hair, antecedent to his entering into Orders.' There was thus a second hazard of imagining, as I suspect he did imagine, that burlesque was his forte. So 1771 closed, and certainly, had nothing higher than these separately and collectively been given, the name of Robert Fergusson must speedily have faded. There is somewhat more *verve* in the burlesques,

even touches of drollery that seem to have caught on, but nothing *quick*. The only thing about them noticeable is that the 'Saturday's Expedition' and the 'Lines written at the Hermitage of Braid' inform us that the young Poet went out of Warriston's Close to breathe the 'caller air,' and perchance he was led to Fifeshire in the 'Saturday's Expedition' in order to combine with it a quiet Sunday in the Manse of Anstruther. The late Dr. Nairne—who was a fellow-student at St. Andrews—delighted to remember Professor Wilkie bringing Fergusson along with him to his venerable father's manse; and the friendship was continued.

Except that such things as his English poems were the *mode* of the period, I am at a loss to understand his wasting his poetic gift on such thin and valueless productions. For though the smooth and the conventional, as one has to reiterate, prevailed and indeed dominated, Scotland had not been without occasional singers in the 'auld leid.' There was Alexander Ross, with Scottish songs of real vigour and go. Mrs. Cockburn's 'Flowers of the Forest' had been printed in *The Lark* in 1765, and Jane Elliot's better words, though not printed till 1776, were well known. Lady Anne Lindsay told Scott her immortal 'Auld Robin Gray' was born, *i.e.* composed, 'after the close of 1771.' Other blithe Scottish lilts and even long poems by Meston and the Forbeses, might be added. So that the mystery is that 'Mr. Robert' was not stirred to emulate.

At last he *was* stirred. The year 1772 opened very differently from 1769–1771. For on January 2nd a poem proclaimed unmistakably that the born heir of Allan Ramsay and his 'young gentlemen' had arrived. Then appeared 'The Daft Days.' There succeeded, but not till 5th March, another vernacular, 'Elegy on the Death of Scots Music.' The latter only can we find room for in full, but previous to so giving it I glean two stanzas from the other — as having inspired Skinner's 'Tullochgorum':—

> 'Fiddlers! your pins in temper fix,
> And roset weel your fiddlesticks,
> But banish vile Italian tricks
> From out your quorum,
> Nor fortes wi' pianos mix—
> Gie's Tullochgorum.

For nought can cheer the heart sae wee
As can a canty Highland reel;
It even vivifies the heel
To skip and dance:
Lifeless is he wha canna feel
Its influence.'

Now for the—

ELEGY ON THE DEATH OF SCOTS MUSIC.

'On Scotia's plains, in days of yore,
When lads and lasses tartan wore,
Saft Music rang on ilka shore,
In hamely weid;
But Harmony is now no more,
And Music dead.

Round her the feather'd choir would wing,
Sae bonnily she wont to sing,
And sleely wake the sleeping string,
Their sang to lead,
Sweet as the zephyrs of the Spring;
But now she's dead.

Mourn ilka nymph and ilka swain,
Ilk sunny hill and dowie glen;
Let weeping streams and Naiads drain
Their fountain head;
Let echo swell the dolefu' strain,
Since Music's dead.

When the saft vernal breezes ca'
The grey-hair'd Winter's fogs awa',
Naebody then is heard to blaw,
Near hill or mead,
On chaunter or on aiten straw,
Since Music's dead.

Nae lasses now, on simmer days,
Will lilt at bleaching of their claes;
Nae herds on Yarrow's bonny braes,
Or banks of Tweed,
Delight to chant their hameil lays,
Since Music's dead.

At glomin', now, the bagpipe's dumb,
When weary owsen hameward come;
Sae sweetly as it wont to bum,
And pibrachs skreed;
We never hear its warlike hum,
For Music's dead.

Macgibbon's gane: Ah! waes my heart!
The man in music maist expert,
Wha cou'd sweet melody impart,
And tune the reed,
Wi' sic a slee and pawky art;
But now he's dead.

Ilk carline now may grunt and grane,
Ilk bonny lassie make great mane;
Since he's awa', I trow there's nane
Can fill his stead;
The blythest sangster on the plain!
Alake, he's dead!

Now foreign sonnets bear the gree
And crabbit queer variety
Of sounds fresh sprung frae Italy,
A bastard breed!
Unlike that saft-tongu'd melody
Which now lies dead.

Can lav'rocks at the dawning day,
Can linties chirming frae the spray,
Or todling burns that smoothly play
O'er gowden bed,
Compare wi' Birks of Indermay?
But now they're dead.

O Scotland! that cou'd yence afford
To bang the pith of Roman sword,
Winna your sons, wi' joint accord,
To battle speed,
And fight till Music be restor'd,
Which now lies dead?'

Said I not well, 'Here is a new note'? 'The Daft Days' and the 'Elegy' are marked with double stars of approbation by the late Sir William Stirling-Maxwell of Keir in his copy of Fergusson—now one of my treasures; and no one who has insight can fail to recognise the humour, the drollery, the pat wording of the former or the pathos and picturesqueness of the latter. We shall see the 'Elegy's' third stanza expanding in Burns's hands into the great 'Elegy on Captain Matthew Henderson.'

Only two short vernacular poems appeared in the whole 15th volume of Ruddiman's *Weekly Magazine*, but sufficient to assure Scotland of the dawn of a *new renaissance* destined to advance on the Scottish horizon to a full day. Alas! alas! brief for its bringer!

The next volume—leaving unregistered here and onward the English verse—yields us 'The King's Birthday in Edinburgh' (June 4th, 1772). Vol. xvii. finds him again repeating and reflecting the tinkle-tinkle of John Cunningham, oblivious of his 'Kate of Aberdeen'; but happily he again shook himself free from puerilities and mimicries, and on August 27th appeared 'Caller Oysters.' I feel constrained again to invite the reader to read and re-read a very few representative stanzas from both of these vernacular poems

THE KING'S BIRTHDAY IN EDINBURGH.

'I sing the day sae aften sung,
Wi' which our lugs hae yearly rung,
In whase loud praise the Muse has dung
A' kind o' print;
But wow! the limmer's fairly flung;
There's naething in't.

I'm fain to think the joys the same
In London town as here at hame,
Whare folk of ilka age and name,
Baith blind and cripple,
Forgather aft, O fy for shame!
To drink and tipple.

O Muse, be kind, and dinna fash us,
To flee awa' beyont Parnassus,
Nor seek for Helicon to wash us,
That heath'nish spring;
Wi' Highland whisky scour our hawses;
And gar us sing.

Begin then, dame, ye've drunk your fill,
You wouldna hae the tither gill?
You'll trust me, mair would do you ill,
And ding you doitet;
Troth 'twould be sair agains my will
To hae the wyte o't.'

CALLER OYSTERS.

'Whan big as burns the gutters rin,
Gin ye hae catcht a droukit skin,
To Luckie Middlemist's loup in,
And sit fu' snug
O'er oysters and a dram o' gin,
Or haddock lug.

When auld Saunt Giles, at aught o'clock,
Gars merchant louns their shopies lock,
There we adjourn wi' hearty fock
To birle our bodles,
And get wharewi' to crack our joke,
And clear our noddles.

Whan Phœbus did his windocks steek,
How aften at that ingle cheek
Did I my frosty fingers beek,
And taste gude fare:
I trow there was nae hame to seek
When steghin there.

While glakit fools, o'er rife o' cash,
Pamper their weyms wi' fousom trash,
I think a chiel may gayly pass,
He's no ill boden
That gusts his gabb wi' oyster sauce,
And hen weel soden.'

There we have the same broad yet uncoarsened humour, the same scintillating wit, the same expressive vocabulary throughout. And so it went on. For vol. xviii. more than sustained the young Poet's reputation. In it there came in rapid succession 'Braid Claith' (October 15, 1772); 'Geordie and Davie: an Eclogue to the Memory of Dr. William Wilkie' (October 29); 'Hallowfair' (November 12); and 'To the Tron Kirk Bell.' Vol. xix. was even more memorable; for it gave us 'Caller Water' (January 21, 1773); 'Mutual Complaint of Plainstanes and Causey, in their mother-tongue' (March 4); 'The Rising of the Session' (March 18). Vol. xx. still more advances. In it came 'Ode to the Bee' (April 29), dated Broomhouse, East Lothian; 'The Farmer's Ingle' (May 13); 'The Ghaists: a Kirkyard Eclogue' (May 27); 'On seeing a Butterfly in the Street' (June 24).

I wish I might have reproduced the whole of these. That is impossible. I *per force* content myself with 'Braid Claith' and three stanzas from 'The Farmer's Ingle.'

BRAID CLAITH.

'Ye wha are fain to hae your name
Wrote in the bonny book of fame,
Let merit nae pretension claim
To laurel'd wreath,
But hap ye weel, baith back and wame,
In gude Braid Claith.

He that some ells o' this may fa',
An' slae black hat on pow like snaw,
Bids bauld to bear the gree awa',
Wi' a' this graith,
Whan bienly clad wi' shell fu' braw
O' gude Braid Claith.

Waesuck for him wha has nae fek o't!
For he's a gowk they're sure to geck at,
A chield that ne'er will be respekit
While he draws breath,
Till his four quarters are bedeckit
Wi' gude Braid Claith.

On Sabbath-days the barber spark,
Whan he has done wi' scrapin wark
Wi' siller broachie in his sark,
Gangs trigly, faith!
Or to the Meadows or the Park,
In gude Braid Claith.

Weel might ye trow, to see them there,
That they to shave your haffits bare,
Or curl an' sleek a pickle hair,
Wud be right laith,
Whan pacing wi' a gawsy air
In gude Braid Claith.

If ony mettled stirrah grien
For favour frae a lady's ein,
He mauna care for being seen
Before he sheath
His body in a scabbard clean
O' gude Braid Claith.

For, gin he come wi' coat threed-bare,
A feg for him she winna care,
But crook her bonny mou' fu' sair,
An' scald him baith.
Wooers shou'd ay their travel spare
Without Braid Claith.

Braid Claith lends fouk an unco heese,
Makes mony kail-worms butter-flees,
Gies mony a doctor his degrees
For little skaith:
In short, you may be what you please
Wi' gude Braid Claith.

For thof ye had as wise a snout on,
As Shakespeare or Sir Isaac Newton,
Your judgment fouk wud hae a doubt on,
I'll tak' my aith,
Till they could see ye wi' a suit on
O' gude Braid Claith.'

THE FARMER'S INGLE.

'Whan gloming grey out o'er the welkin keeks,
Whan Batie ca's his owsen to the byre,
Whan Thrasher John, sair dung, his barn-door steeks,
And lusty lasses at the dighting tire:
What bangs fu' leal the e'enings coming cauld,
And gars snaw-tapit winter freeze in vain:
Gars dowie mortals look baith blyth and bauld,
Nor fley'd wi' a' the poortith o' the plain;
Begin my Muse, and chant in hamely strain.

. . . . . .

For weel she trows that fiends and fairies be
Sent frae the de'il to fleetch us to our ill;
That ky hae tint their milk wi' evil eie,
And corn been scowder'd on the glowing kill.
O mock na this, my friends! but rather mourn,
Ye in life's brawest spring wi' reason clear,
Wi' eild our idle fancies a' return,
And dim our dolefu' days wi' bairnly fear;
The mind's ay cradled whan the grave is near.

. . . . . .

Peace to the husbandman and a' his tribe,
Whase care fells a' our wants frae year to year;
Lang may his sock and couter turn the gleyb,
And bauks o' corn bend down wi' laded ear.
May Scotia's simmers ay look gay and green,
Her yellow har'sts frae scowry blasts decreed;
May a' her tenants sit fu' snug and bien,
Frae the hard grip of ails and poortith freed,
And a lang lasting train o' peaceful hours succeed.'

Vol. xxi. opened delightfully with 'Hame Content: a Satire' (July 8, 1773); 'Leith Races' (July 22); 'Ode to the Gowdspink' and to the 'Principal and Professors of the University of St. Andrews on their superb treat to Dr. Samuel Johnson' (Sept. 2); 'The Election' (Sept. 16); 'Elegy on John Hogg' (Sept. 23). Vol. xxii. brought 'The Sitting of the Session' (Nov. 4); 'A Drink Eclogue' (Nov. 11); 'To my Auld Breeks' (Nov. 25); 'Robt. Fergusson's Last Will' and its 'Codicil' (Dec. 23). 'Hame Content,'

'Leith Races,' 'Ode to the Gowdspink,' and 'The Election,' I grudgingly leave out, as my available space wanes.

Curiously enough, while the later poems were running their course, Fergusson collected eleven of his Scottish poems—*not* including 'The Farmer's Ingle' or 'Hame Content' or 'Leith Races'—in a little volume with engraved title-page.

I have gone forward from January 2, 1772, that I might focus attention on the whole of the vernacular poems. The 'new voice' was instantly recognised. The Scots poems were reprinted in every possible magazine and newspaper—only the old *Scots Magazine* jealously holding aloof for a while until conquered—as 'by the celebrated Mr. Robert Fergusson.' The grave propriety of the *Scots Magazine* was disturbed. Ruddiman's *Weekly* leapt at a bound to a then unparalleled success. The successive numbers were eagerly waited and watched for. Coffee-rooms and clubs rang with talk of the successive poems. From every nook of broad Scotland complimentary letters and verses were received by the jubilant publisher. One of these, by a J. S. (probably John Scott, a farmer), thus opened his verse-letter—

> 'Is Allan risen frae the deid,
> Wha aft has tun'd the aiten reed,
> And by the Muses was decreed
> To grace the thistle?
> Na; Fergusson's cum in his stead
> To blaw the whistle'
> (*Works*, 1851, pp. 19–21),

with much more equally praise-ful.

Kindred with this was John Mayne of the 'Siller Gun' later in reminiscence, as thus—

> 'Blyth hae I seen about the ingle,
> The neighbours a', baith wed an' single,
> Flock round, to hear his verses gingle,
> Frae far an' near,
> (The priest wad aft amang them mingle,
> An' lean to hear.)
>
> Had ane been owther wat or weary,
> Or had some dawted scornfu' deary
> Turn'd a' our mirth to blirtin bleery
> Wi' taunts right sour,
> His canty tales would make us cheary
> In ha'f an hour.

'Twas than, as now, your fame gaed roun'
To sic a pitch thro' ilka toun,
That the postboy cou'd nowther soun'
Nor blaw his horn,
But heeps o' fouk wad him surroun'
Be't een or morn.

An' gin they chanc'd to miss their erran'
(When ye had gi'en the lads their fairin',
An' they o' wark had been but spairin'
At case or press,)
Hame wad they gang, like ane despairin',
In sad distress.

But sair we miss our ain braid measure
Sin Rabie die't.'

Throughout Robert Fergusson kept his head. To the end, as in the beginning, he remained self-respecting, but modest and shy to awkwardness when praised. He knew his limitations as well as his powers. Thus, in his off-hand verse-answer to John Scott (?), he puts both finely—

'Awa', ye wylie fleetchin' fallow!
The rose shall grow like gowan yallow,
Before I turn sae toom and shallow,
And void of fushion,
As a' your butter'd words to swallow
In vain delusion.

Ye mak my Muse a dautit pet,
But gin she cou'd like Allan's met,[1]
Or couthie crack and hamely get
Upo' her carritch,
Eithly wad I be in your debt
A pint o' parritch.

. . . . . .

But she maun e'en be glad to jook,
And play teet-bo frae nook to nook,
Or blush as gin she had the yook
Upo' her skin,
Whan Ramsay or whan Pennicuik
Their lilts begin.'

(*Works*, 1851, pp. 21–25.)

[1] = measure.

It must be emphasised that the disclaimer by Fergusson of any comparison of him with Allan Ramsay, or even Dr. Alexander Pennicuik (who must have been meant, not Alexander Penicuik, a contemporary rhymester), was sincere. Miss Ruddiman again and again told me that nothing so vexed 'Mr. Robert' as the reading of letters in his praise as they came to the publisher, especially if any strangers were present. He would try to snatch them from the reader, and when he succeeded would crumple them up and toss them into the fire with some such phrase as this, 'These flatterers have never read Ramsay's poems,' or, 'I do not reckon this praise, it is folly.' He was always uneasy and restless when his own productions were being praised, but would listen and join in the praises of others cordially. My aged friend used to close her sunny memories by saying, 'Mr. Robert' (it was always Mr. Robert) 'was a dear, gentle, modest creature; his cheeks, naturally pale, would flush with girlish pink at a compliment.' Surely all this is very fine?

It is important to keep in mind the chronology of the welcome of this advent of a new poet. In many editions of the Poems, from Ruddiman's (pt. ii., 1779) strange to say, onward to the latest, by Mr. Robert Aitken, M.A. (1895, Riverside Press), J. S.'s verse-letter is dated 1773, whereas it preceded by nearly a whole year the volume of 1773, as did also the pseudonymous verse-letters of Dr. Andrew Gray. So that the advent was hailed as distinctively as Robert Burns's on the publication of the slim Kilmarnock octavo of 1786. To my mind the immediate welcome is at once creditable to Scotland, and, when pondered, extremely suggestive of the difference of the always well-educated Scottish 'commonalty' from the English yokels, stolid and uneducated. Nor is it without an element of pathos. The recognition was by the 'common people' first of all, and passed upward, exactly as with Burns. Hence I go beyond even what I have thus far claimed. I believe that a consideration of all the facts will convince that Robert Fergusson created the demand for the volume of 1786. I question if there had been no Robert Fergusson —if from Ramsay's death forward English verse, such as it was, had usurped the ears of readers, and if there had not

been this preparedness—whether that volume would have found so prompt fame.

I said I find pathos in the welcome extended to Fergusson. How? Because it reveals how deep-rooted was the gladness of the nation on hearing again that too long forsaken 'mother-leid.' The interregnum between Allan Ramsay and Fergusson's advent in so far as our vernacular was concerned was not creditable, to say the least. David Hume might have been a Frenchman for his language and style. Smollett degraded Scottish life to English eyes. James Thomson had left the North, and never probably wrote one stanza in Scots. Those who remained, as was said of Lord Jeffrey, spoke and wrote 'nippity nippity' English. Dr. James Beattie, as we shall see, held our vernacular to be too vulgar for poetry; and yet his own Scottish verse-letter to Alexander Ross and his most admirable inserted verse in Mickle's 'There's nae luck about the house,' and his single stanza of the 'Ewe and the crookit horn,' have outlived the harmonious twaddle of 'The Minstrel' (a very few lines excepted). Robert Fergusson elected to use his own native tongue. More of this in c. xi.

I have exhibited thus minutely the successive poems as rapidly published from week to week in the *Magazine* through 1772–3, because I have a conviction that only by so doing do we get a bird's-eye view, so to say, of the Poet's life during this brief and memorable period. On the one hand, we have to think of such drudgery day by day as we have found, and on the other at leisure hours this fecundity and brilliance of poetic faculty vernacularly.

I have now to return on the little volume of 1773. It was early announced. In the *Scots Magazine* of December 1772 (vol. xxxiv. 672) the book was advertised thus: 'Poems. By Robert Fergusson. 1 vol. 12mo. 1772. 2s. 6d. Drummond and Elliott.' Earlier in the *Courant* of 16th December 1772 this notice had appeared—

'It is stated that a collection of poetry written by Mr. Robert Fergusson, many of whose poems have lately appeared in Ruddiman's *Weekly Magazine*, will be put out shortly. Mr. Fergusson is a true poet.'

In the same newspaper, on 26th September 1773, the 'Address to the Tron Kirk Bell' was reprinted, and in the

Caledonian Mercury of 12th June 1773, 'Braid Claith,' with the following note:—

'This poem exhibits so many qualities of true excellence that we quote it entire for our readers, as many persons of polite taste desired to seê it.'

I should gladly lay down a gold sovereign to know who wrote the sentence, 'Mr. Fergusson is a true poet.' I like to think it may have been Henry Mackenzie, who wrote the memorable paper of welcome to Burns.

The little book cannot have been published—though it had been earlier circulated in private gift-copies—until the close of 1773. As Drummond and Elliott were not the publishers, I record at this point that they were the receivers of subscription-papers. I have seen several of these, and against the names £1, 1s. and upwards was written in. The Ruddimans published the 1773 volume, and I was delighted to find not only these subscription-papers, but a memorandum to the effect — contrary to Dr. Robert Chambers and all his biographers except myself—that he pocketed a clear fifty pounds, or double what Robert Burns did by his Kilmarnock volume. There were a few large-paper copies struck off. I had once one of them, and it ranged exactly with my set of the 1786 Burns, Sillar and Lapraik, Little and Turnbull, whereas the ordinary is a small duodecimo.

Several gift-copies must also have been prepared for the Author, and, as before stated, circulated by private gift. All that I have seen are finely bound in full calf and daintily touched with gold and gold roses along the back.

I pause a few moments to chronicle two such inscribed copies as representative of seven traced.[1] The most noticeable was a presentation to his High School schoolfellow, James Boswell. Its inscription is as follows:—

'To James Boswell Esq. the Friend of Liberty and Patron of Science; the following Efforts of a Scottish youth are respectfully presented by his most obedient and very humble servt. R. Fergusson.'

[1] I can only record the others: (1) Dyce Library to Rev. Mr. Welsh; (2) British Museum—Hogg's copy, with pen-sketch of a dog pursuing a hare; (3) To Alexander Kidd—who only died in 1844; (4) David Herd's; (5) Earl of Glencairn's.

No trace of acknowledgment from Boswell has been happed on, but the fact that the little book was taken to Auchinleck and carefully preserved there as well by *the* Boswell as by Sir Alexander, a genuine Scottish poet, permits us to indulge the hope that he did recognise the giver and old schoolfellow at the High School.

Another gift-copy is in Lord Rosebery's priceless collection of editions of Fergusson and everything possibly obtainable on him and his poetry—far and away the richest and most noticeable known.

'To the honorable
Alexander Murray Esq.
of Murrayfield,—as a small
mark of Gratitude for his
Patronage & Beneficence:
The following juvenile productions
are respectfully presented by
his much obliged humble servt.
R. Fergusson.
Edinr. 14th Janv. 1773.'

This was (afterwards) the judge Lord Henderland, who, be it noted, prior to his elevation to the Bench was one of the Commissary Court wherein the Poet wrote.

I hope it will be conceded that I have fulfilled the heading of this chapter, 'Advent of a new vernacular Poet.' I hope, too, I have said sufficient to win praise for the commonalty of Scotland not less than for their social superiors for their instantaneous welcome to the young Poet—their gladsome absorption of what must have been an exceptionally large edition, probably four times over Burns's volume of 1786.

One has only to realise the conditions of literary property, with copyright practically null and an income from authorship quite out of the question until Robertson, Hume, and Hugh Blair obtained their astonishing payments, to appreciate the £50 that was derived from the volume of 1773. It must also be stated, on the authority of Miss Ruddiman, confirmed by the Ruddiman MSS. put into my hands, that exclusive of this, the Ruddimans were accustomed to hand to Fergusson regular payments for his poems as they appeared from week to week, and from 1771–2 the Poet had a gift of two suits of clothes—one for

week-days and one for Sundays. Memoranda also go to prove that he received from time to time money and book-gifts from admirers.

It is thus certain that Burns and others exaggerated his poverty. 'Starve' is a much too strong word, just as Ben Jonson's account of Spenser's death is a gross exaggeration. If in some of the poor English poems there are plaints of straits, his 'Damon to his Friends' is bright and hopeful and grateful. We should gladly have exchanged it for as many lines or stanzas in 'gude braid Scots,' for it is in the wretched manner of John Cunningham, but biographically it is pleasing reading. I give here a few of its brighter stanzas—

'Dame Fortune and I are agreed;
Her frowns I no longer endure;
For the goddess has kindly decreed
That Damon no more shall be poor.

Now riches will ope the dim eyes,
To view the increase of my store;
And many my friendship will prize
Who never knew Damon before.

. . . . . .

Attend, ye kind youth of the plain!
Who oft with my sorrows condoled;
You cannot be deaf to the strain,
Since Damon is master of gold.'

(*Works*, 1851, pp. 202–3.)

Before closing this chapter, it is necessary to put aside another of Irving's slanders that after-biographers have credulously accepted. He cruelly maligns Fergusson, in seeking—and he does seek—to leave the impression that the £50 of 'gold' thus so pathetically magnified, was a curse rather than a blessing, that forthwith the 'drouthy,' 'dissipated' Poet spent it in 'riotous living.' It is an abominable falsehood. When I read the passage to Miss Ruddiman, her eyes filled with tears and a tremble came into her voice,—she was then nearing ninety,—and rising to her feet she said with emphasis, 'No, sir, it is most untrue. I see Mr. Robert before me at this moment at the close of 1773, and I remember clearly the dear boy's delight as he tinkled the guineas and said, "My poor good mother shall have her full share."' And so it was, as Mrs. Fergusson with a full heart after he was gone, told them all.

It is shocking to discover the twist that Irving's gossip-gathered falsehoods have given to the facts in nearly all after 'Lives,' leading them to put the worst and imaginary constructions on the most innocent actions. Such 'conscientious malevolence,' as Gaston Boissier said of the German treatment of Cicero's Letters, is scarcely forgivable.

To round off Fergusson's authorship, I add here that in 1774 he was persuaded to write and publish a Lament for John Cunningham. It is in no way remarkable, but was printed in a handsome quarto by the royal printer Kincaid.

CHAPTER IX

SOCIETY OF THE PERIOD—CONVIVALIA—CORRECTIVE STATEMENTS AND APOLOGIA

'I look for howfs I kenn'd lang syne,
Whar gentles used to drink gude wine
And eat cheap dinners.'
SCOTT (*Epilogue to drama of St. Ronan's Well*).

WE have now to discuss a complex moral problem. His advent as a new-note Poet, like that of Robert Burns, lifted him suddenly from friendless, or all but friendless, obscurity into the very blaze of day, or unmetaphorically with the appearance of 'The Daft Days,' 'Elegy on the Death of Scots Music,' 'The King's Birthday in Edinburgh,' and 'Caller Oysters' of 1772, his society was eagerly sought by SOCIETY. As we have seen, with 'line upon line,' he kept steadfastly to his monotonous drudgery during the office-hours of the Commissary-Depute's desk. Never was there a breath of fault-finding on that. But when the day's task was done and the doors were closed, he was literally 'seized' by manifold admirers of nearly all ranks and kinds. True—just again as with Robert Burns's retiring from the presence of duchesses, nobles, learned professors, clergy, to John Richmond's 'room' in Baxter's Close, Lawnmarket, for which he paid three shillings a week—he had to return to 'Jamieson's Land' and 'Warriston's Close' when the time for parting came. But none the less we must remember he was 'taken out' by the bailies and lawyers, the shopkeepers and young bucks; and, once more like Robert Burns, it was discovered by one and all that Robert Fergusson as a conversationalist, as a humorist, as a waggish wit, as a 'fellow of infinite jest,' was equal to the best of them, could hold his own with the wittiest and

wisest, and so entertain that the hours sped often too far on in the mornings. These gatherings, as did almost all social gatherings of the period, took place mainly in the clubs, taverns, ale-houses, and oyster-cellars of 'Auld Reekie.' Has our Poet not set it all forth, in his 'Caller Oysters,' at Luckie Middlemist's 'howff,' as we saw?

Pleasant Hunter of Blackness has similarly put it of Johnny Dow's—

> 'A' ye wha wis' on e'enings lang
> To meet, an' crack, an' sing a sang,
> *An' weet your pipes for little wrang*
> *To purse or person.*'

Be Fergusson's own words marked—'birle our *bodles*.' A bodle was the one-sixth of an English penny, and I accentuate this because it was used by Fergusson not simply as an apt rhyme-word, but as the exact matter of fact, that the expenditure was very small—rarely beyond sixpence—and so *primâ facie* evidence that alleged 'wasterliness' and 'dissipation' and all the rest of Irving's malignant as false vocabulary, carry absurdity in them. More of this anon, for this only concerns the individual—that is, Robert Fergusson—in so far as his own personal spending went, whether on 'caller oysters,' or on Luckie Middlemist's or Johnny Dow's ale. But beyond these sittings with 'hearty fock,' as beyond the inner circle of the 'twa or three' congenial friends with whom it was the Poet's delight to meet and by 'cracks' and singing of Scotland's 'auld sangs' with that dulcet voice of his, there was the Society —not exactly the 'upper ten' in present-day sense, yet higher socially than Fergusson—of which I spoke in the outset of this chapter. To understand the temptations, the fascinations, the overcoming forces, the victimising allurements into which he was thus suddenly plunged, and had to resist and did resist, it is profoundly necessary to get at the facts of the Convivalia, or, as Sir Walter phrases it, the 'High-jinks,' on 'Saturday nicht at e'en,'—as immortalised in *Waverley* and *Redgauntlet*,—with Dandie Dinmont, and 'the cam-stane' in the entry, and the wild licence over the 'tappit hen' of the lawyers—ay, judges. The most superficial acquaintance with the FACTS would have closed the mouths of your David Irvings and Bishop Gleigs and their followers

in perfunctory second and third hand knowledge. On this Dr. Robert Chambers wrote wisely and sympathetically thus—

'The convivialities of Fergusson have been generally described as bordering on excess and as characterising him in particular, amidst a population generally sober. The real truth is, that the poor poet [I intercalate not 'poor poet' any more than 'lame preacher' of the well-known anecdote] indulged exactly in the same way, and in general to the same extent, as other young men [ay, and old men, I again intercalate, and these clergy, judges, gentry] of that day' (*Eminent Scotsmen, s.n.*).

I go farther than this. The facts which I have probed to the bottom satisfy me that, so far from being habitual, Fergusson's 'falls'—accepting the word—were outbreaks under the spell of congenial intellectual associates, kin with but not so terrible as Thomas Carlyle's old schoolmaster's, John Orr. The differentiation as between the 'other young men' of Chambers and this young man was that they were not only *minus* his genius but *minus* his penitence as well and his pathetic retreats to escape and deliver himself from giving them, in Robert Burns's sad phrase, '*a slice of his constitution.*'

I feel bound to flash a search-light over the Society of the period before us. That brings before us humiliating revelations in all-unsuspected places. For example, few can have been prepared for the revelations of Lieutenant Alexander Fergusson's *Major Fraser's Manuscript: his Adventures in Scotland and England* (2 vols., 1889), contained in No. II. of Appendix, entitled 'Duncan Forbes and Tappit Hens' (pp. 158–169). This consists of a wholly holograph letter, fetched from the Pitferrane MSS., written by Duncan Forbes to his friend Mr. John Macfarlane, W.S., whereon the Editor annotates: 'If it does not show the wisdom of the Lord Advocate and Lord President to be, at all events proves the truth of the ancient adage, *poculum mane haustum restaurat naturam*, etc.'

This extraordinary letter reports such bestial degradation of drinking and other cognate indulgences, together with most flagrant mendacity whereby to escape difficulties, as I shrink from characterising. I hesitate not to affirm if any letter one tithe as low, as vulgar, as vile, had been producible in the handwriting of either Robert Fergusson or Robert Burns,

their admirers never should have heard the end of it. And yet, because the writer was the Honourable Duncan Forbes of venerable fame, we are to keep silence! But I go back on this audaciously immoral letter of an ultimately great and good man, not to challenge his greatness or goodness, but to adduce it as proof positive of the homely description of Allan Ramsay somewhat earlier—

'Aften in Maggie's at hy-jinks
We guzzled scuds,
Till we could scarce wi' hale-out drinks
Cast aff our duds.'[1]
('Maggie Johnston.')

Very significant is honest Allan's 'hale-out drinks,' for it means that any glass or tankard had to be drained to the last drop.

Passing from Duncan Forbes and Allan Ramsay's 'Maggie Johnston,' other narratives might be given that reflect Forbes's letter and Ramsay's racy poem. I state without fear of contradiction that, when you get behind the lives of the most renowned judges of the Land, and while they were daily seated on the bench and in actual cases in their maudlin obfuscation were condemning men to be hung with obscene jesting—hung for stealing a sheep and less—and of divines of the highest positions in the Kirk of Scotland, you are startled with such debaucheries, such self-indulgences, such hilarious getting drunk as is appalling. In relation to the clergy, whoso would know the FACTS must read and re-read the unblushing *Autobiography* of the Rev. Dr. Alexander Carlyle, minister of Inveresk, containing Memorials of the Men and Events of his Time (1861), and the many anecdotes of the *evangelical* Dr. Alexander Webster, whose current nickname was *Magnum Bonum*, from his enormous drink-swallowing capacity.

Robert Fergusson had clerical associates,—I dare not call them friends,—and if even the Evangelicals thus indulged, what may we not conceive of the Moderates?

If we pass still further within the circles of society of Edinburgh—1769–1774—we discover equally astonishing evidences how fast was its social life. I may not draw here and now upon my collected materials. I would refer

[1] = undress.

the reader to *Guy Mannering* (c. xxxix. 11, 'Tappit Hen' —convivial habits of the Scottish Bar) and the High-jinks therein celebrated; to the Convivalia of Dr. Robert Chambers in his *Traditions of Edinburgh* and elsewhere; to the letterpress (with all its deficiencies) of John Kay's *Edinburgh Portraits*; to Walter Geikie's renowned and priceless 'Etchings,' and Sir Daniel Wilson's *Old Edinburgh*. These alone will furnish astounding and well-nigh incredible exemplifications of the wild licence of conduct and broadness of speech of both sexes and of all ranks, and how low the examples were of the dwellers in 'ceiled houses' to the masses.

What I maintain, therefore, is this—that it is uncritical and wicked to single out young Robert Fergusson, to moralise over him, and fling at him such words as 'dissipation,' 'indulgence,' 'drunken,' 'vicious,' when, by the necessities of circumstance, it was out of his power habitually to live the dissipated life mis-ascribed to him, and when the secret of any backsliding or over-staying in club or tavern or ale-house was due to the impulsion, if I ought not to say compulsion, of lawyers and clergy and well-to-do folks, ebullient wits and cits and bucks, not at all to his love for strong drink *qua* drink, and never for a day—except in sickness—involving neglect of his dreary task-work in the Commissary-Depute's office. All this was vigorously phrased by Burns, and I give Fergusson the benefit of it—

> 'It's no' I like to sit and swallow,
> *But gie me just a true guid fallow,*
> *Wi' right ingine,*
> And spunkie ance to make us mellow,
> And then we'll shine.'
> ('To John Kennedy.')

Fergusson's own protest is thin and weak beside stalwart Burns's, but it is on the same lines—

> *'He who tastes his grape-juice by stealth,*
> *Without chosen companions to share,*
> *Is the basest of slaves to his wealth,*
> *And the pitiful minion of care.'*
> ('Damon to his Friends.')

I demand on behalf of Fergusson that the welcomes extended to him were inextricably mixed up with temptation

to so susceptible and sensitive a being. The usage of the period made his invitations out and his evening fellowship almost exclusively in the taverns and ale-houses and oyster-cellars. It is matter of fact that lawyers adjourned thither to be consulted by their clients; divines 'daundered' thither to converse with their parishioners on 'serious things' that ended in things not serious; doctors saw their patients in public-houses, as testifies Dr. John Armstrong, poet of the 'Art of Preserving Health'; wages were paid there; gentlewomen arranged for 'parties' in strangest of strange 'houffs'; and so all round. We are to think of all flocking thither and as sitting and drinking and jesting till far on beyond '*the wee short hour ayont the twal*'.' There was no Forbes Mackenzie Act then, no limitation of hours, no police interference, no grandmotherly legislation. All these were *in gremio futuri*; 'Kilbagie' was sold at a penny a gill; claret flowed like water; a beggar could get drunk on a groat (if the ale were bad or Johnny Dow's seconds). All these things are reflected in the city-poems of Fergusson, and hence Angellier has drawn mainly upon them in his vivid pictures of every-day and every-night life of Edinburgh; and from them we are compelled to realise that then practically there were no public entertainments such as now abound —no public lectures—hardly even concerts, merely the stiff and starched 'Assembly' that so distressed Oliver Goldsmith, presided over by Miss Nicky Murray and her set. There was nothing whereby mind was pitted against mind, through discussion of some great book or of political, ethical, and metaphysical problems. Political freedom—'free speech' —had not yet been won, and only by a small minority was so much as dreamed of.

It was, therefore, under these heavy conditions that Robert Fergusson was plunged—and I re-use the word rather than was introduced. I ask if it would not have been a moral miracle, an impossible exception, had he not paid the penalty of such plunge; not forgetting that he took it with a constitution primarily feeble, and could not but be more easily over-set with quantities of claret, whisky, or ale that legal and clerical topers would have laughed at.

I for one, too, can understand the irresistible temptation to forget sordid cares and sorrows of circumstance by

spending his evenings that he was invited to spend, in clubs, taverns, and ale-houses. He himself has dropped significant hints that reveal how he strove against the current of city-life. To me the very commonplaceness of certain of his English poems, when read between the lines, conveys an impression of felt victimisation that is infinitely pathetic—nay, tragic.

Still more pregnantly suggestive is the 'Town and Country Contrasted in an epistle to a friend,' of 'rosy health,' which the reader will do well to study. Individual lines and couplets gleam like tears in the very poorest verses; *e.g.*—

'Adieu! *ye baneful pleasures of the town!*'

'Where Pride and Folly point *the slippery way.*'
('Retirement.')

'Alas! how poor the pleasures these impart!'
('Decay of Friendship.')

'Fled are the moments of *delusive mirth*;
The fancy'd pleasure! paradise divine!'

'What evils have not *frenzied mortals done*
By wine, the *ignis fatuus* of the mind!'

'By Bacchus power, ye sons of riot say,
How many watchful sentinels have bled,
How many travellers have lost their way,
By lamps unguided through the ev'ning shade.'

How inevitably are we reminded, as we meditate on these affecting proofs of the moral conflict in Fergusson's bosom, of the profound as tender philosophy of Robert Burns with its magnificent burden—

'What's DONE we partly may compute,
But know not what's RESISTED.'

I pause here to adopt for Fergusson a still more penetrative and a remarkably tender and exceptionally generous verdict on Burns from LORD JEFFREY. His whole emotion and its expression as exacted by a sympathetic study of our Poet, applies to him—

'In the last week I have read all Burns's life and works—not without many tears, for the life especially. What touches me most is the

pitiable poverty in which that gifted being (and his noble-minded father) passed his early days—the painful frugality to which their innocence was doomed, and the thought, how small a share of the useless luxuries in which *we* (such comparatively poor creatures) indulge, would have sufficed to shed joy and cheerfulness in their dwelling and perhaps to have saved that glorious spirit from the trials and temptations under which he fell so prematurely. Oh, my dear Empson, there must be something terribly wrong in the present arrangements of the Universe when these things can happen and be thought natural. I could lie down in the dust and cry and grovel there, I think, for a century, to save such a soul as Burns from the suffering and the contamination and the degradation which the same arrangements imposed upon him; and I fancy that if I could but have known him in my present state of wealth and influence, I might have saved and reclaimed and preserved him even to the present day. He would not have been so old as my brother judge, Lord Glenlee, or Lord Lynedoch, or a dozen others that we meet daily in society. And what a creature, not only in genius, but in nobleness of character, potentially at least, if right models had been put gently before him. But we must not dwell on it. You South Saxons cannot value him rightly, and miss half the pathos and more than half of the sweetness. There is no such mistake as that your chief miss is in the humour or the shrewd sense. It is in far higher and more delicate elements—God help you. We shall be up to the whole, I trust, in another world' (Lord Cockburn's *Life of Jeffrey*, i. pp. 451–2: 11th Nov. 1837).

In the lights and shadows of all this I now proceed to demonstrate the necessity of our handling the whole problem so as to traverse the miserable gossip-mongering and as miserable moralising of Dr. David Irving, that has given form and colour to nearly every subsequent biographer, with disastrous results. Dealing with his thoughtless rather than perhaps malignant misrepresentations, I first present in integrity his bitter worst and all, and I shall then place beside it the finer and more sane and human accounts of Thomas Sommers and others who knew him intimately, since he was absolutely and necessarily unknown to Irving.

I give Dr. Irving the benefit of quoting from his later edition of the Life (1804, *Lives of Scottish Writers*, ii. 409–40). I italicise *bits* that will go far to obviate need of commentary or refutation after what I have already said and shown, save correction of alleged facts—

'The public immediately began to perceive the merit of his productions; and from their first appearance in the *Weekly Magazine*, he was regarded as a poet of no ordinary talents. As the charms of his social qualities were even superior to those of his poetry, it is not

surprising that his company was eagerly solicited by people of every description. To the circles where gaiety and humour prevailed, his conversation recommended itself by every possible allurement; and where more grave deportment was necessary, he could accommodate his manners to those of the individual with whom he was usually associated. Such qualities as these, without producing any beneficial effects, tended to connect him with *unprofitable companions, who gradually conducted him through the various stages of vice and dissipation.* From the caresses of the moment he could derive no solid advantage. Those who have spent an ecstatic evening in the company of some man of intellectual eminence, are often very indifferent with respect to the mode in which he disposes of himself after the hour of separation: the object for which they solicited his company being obtained, they seldom exert themselves in order to place him in a situation adequate to his merit and congenial to his wishes' (ii. 420–1).

Further—

'His latter years were *wasted in perpetual dissipation.* The condition to which he had reduced himself, prepared him for *grasping at any object which promised a temporary alleviation of his cares; and as his funds were often in an exhausted state, he at length had recourse to mean expedients.* Associates possessed of the same taste for letters and of *the same ruinous habits of intemperance* were not wanting. Men of this seeming incongruity of character have always abounded in the northern as well as in the southern metropolis' (*ib.* pp. 421–2).

Finally—

'His surviving relations retain a pleasing remembrance of his dutiful behaviour towards his parents; and the tender regard with which his memory is still cherished by his numerous acquaintance, fully demonstrates his value as a friend. *Till his dissipated manner of life had in a great measure eradicated all sense of delicacy or propriety*, he always evinced a manly spirit of independence. Let it be recorded to his honour that he never disgraced his Muse with the servile strain of panegyric; that he flattered no illiterate peer, nor sacrificed his sincerity in order to advance his interest' (*ib.* p. 430).[1]

Before placing beside this infamously darkened picture—spite of its justifiable censure of the heedlessness of many who spend 'an ecstatic evening in the company of some men of intellectual eminence' and the modicum of praise worked in here and there—Thomas Sommers's absolute contradiction of it, I meet the charges italicised with irrefragable Facts.

[1] The more creditable that so to do was common enough. Even a Bishop (Porteous) dared to write and publish this of George II.:—

'No farther blessing could on earth be given,
The next degree of happiness was heaven!'

The so-called 'unprofitable companions' and 'evil associates' were men of character. Their names are introduced into the Poet's 'Last Will' and its 'Codicil,' and unluckily for Irving he specifically refers to these poems as containing the names he had in his mind. To brand Thomas Sommers, David Herd, Alexander Runciman, James Cummyng, William Woods, [Sir] Henry Raeburn, George Paton, and the rest within and without the 'Will' and 'Codicil' as this stripling biographer had the audacity to do, was an outrage on all literary decency and amenity, and, as we shall learn immediately, the outcome of listening to the irresponsible chatter of men who boasted that Fergusson held them for friends, though he never knew them.

The phrase '*he at length had recourse to mean expedients*' receives its ignominious *quietus* by giving the actual story, whence it was derived, as I personally compelled Dr. Irving ruefully to admit when I confronted him with it. Sommers tells it—

> 'Such were his vocal powers and attachment to Scots songs, that in the course of his convivial frolics, he laid a wager with some of his associates, that if they would furnish him with a certain number of printed ballads (no matter what kind) he would undertake to dispose of them as a street-singer, in the course of two hours. The bet was laid, and next evening, being in the month of November, a large bundle of ballads were procured for him. He wrapped himself in a shabby great-coat, put on an old scratch-wig, and in this disguised form, commenced his adventure at the Weigh-house, head of the West Bow. In his going down the Lawnmarket and High Street, he had the address to collect great multitudes around him, while he amused them with a variety of favourite Scots songs, by no means such as he had ballads for, and gained the wager, by disposing of the whole collection. He waited on his companions by eight o'clock that evening, and spent with them, in mirthful glee, the produce of his street adventure' (pp. 27–8).

This pure frolic and its shared 'produce' your Drs. Dryasdust set down as a resort to 'mean expedients'! Surely comment is not called for? But how light were the task, if need were, to parallel this particular escapade!

The generalisation of 'perpetual dissipation,' and 'dissipated manner of life, eradicating all sense of delicacy,' Thomas Sommers indignantly deals with.

It is obligatory that I further preserve another little statement by Miss Ruddiman to myself, in reference to Mr.

Robert's going to Johnny Dow's and Luckie Middlemist's and elsewhere oftener than Mr. Ruddiman could approve.

'His cheek,' said she, 'I have often heard my brother say, would redden through its paleness if but a hint of such meetings were thrown out, and on being remonstrated with, with the big tears trickling between his fingers as he held them over his face, he would sob, "Oh, sir, anything to forget my poor mother and these aching fingers!"' (*Works*, 1851, p. lxxxiii).

Solomon of old knew all about this 'forgetting.' Has he not counselled, 'Let him *drink*, and *forget* his poverty and *remember* his misery no more'? (Proverbs xxxi. 7). Has he not also luridly yet half-pitifully described the enticement, the *βασκανία*, nay, 'the *pleasures* of sin' that tepid-blooded Pharisees know nothing of (professedly), but which others more human do understand, and understand how over and over men of the make of Robert Fergusson and John Keats indulge or if you will sin, not because they desire to sin but to suck the pleasure. How moralists ignore this! Robert Burns must again speak here—

'O ye douce folk, that *live by rule*,
Grave, tideless-blooded, calm and cool,
Compar'd wi' you—O fool! fool! fool!
How much unlike!
Your hearts are just a standing pool,
Your lives a dyke.'
('To James Smith.')

Now for Sommers's incisive if homely criticism of Dr. David Irving—again italicising *bits* that will reward pondering—

'To the Reader,—Notwithstanding various accounts have already been published of the life of Robert Fergusson, I flatter myself, that I need scarcely apologise for having added one more to the number; seeing I have been enabled *to trace the history of that Poet from the intimate acquaintance which for a series of years subsisted between us.* In the course of that acquaintance, I must have enjoyed *many opportunities of acquiring more certain knowledge of his real character, than those biographers who knew him not, and who had* taken their materials from others little better informed than themselves. . . . As I have observed, his short-lived existence has been recorded by several writers [Irving, Alexander Campbell, Bishop Gleig], but I am sorry to say, that they seem *to have been more anxious to display their own abilities as to grammatical precision and pompous description*, than studious of

simplicity of style AND TRUTH in the narrative. . . . *With the best good-nature, with much modesty, and the greatest goodness of heart, he was always sprightly, always entertaining*' (pp. iii–vi).

More trenchantly on the Life itself—

'The last edition [of his Poems] printed in Scotland, was at Glasgow in the year 1800, to which also is prefixed a Life of the Poet, *differing materially from every former*: the writer of which, however, sets out with observing—"It is to be wished, that the life of this unfortunate Poet had been delineated by someone possessed of more ample information than the present writer [Dr. David Irving], with all his endeavours, has been able to procure." This observation is perhaps just; *but had he been better acquainted with the life and genuine character* of the young bard, *a variety of reflections which he has thought proper to make, would not have been found in his narrative.*'

Finally, and drastically, and as by a *ricochet* returning Irving's evil words on his own head, we have this attestation—

'In this account of the life of Robert Fergusson, I can assure the reader that although it is nearly at the distance of twenty-nine years since he died, the various and singular circumstances which marked his history, and of which I have taken notice, are at present almost as fresh in my remembrance as when they occurred. I passed many happy hours with him, NOT IN DISSIPATION AND FOLLY, but in useful conversation and in listening to the more inviting and rational displays of his wit, sentiment, and story; in the exercise of which he never failed to please, instruct, and charm. Here I cannot help taking notice of an assertion which appears in the Life accompanying the Glasgow edition of his works: "that he associated with men of very dissolute manners, several of whom are mentioned in his 'Last Will' and the 'Codicil' to it." As I showed before, that the author of that Life has been egregiously wrong in many particulars, so in this likewise *he is equally erroneous*. I KNEW those persons well; they were indeed men of a social cast, but not of that debauched turn which the term *dissolute* bears. They are all sleeping in the dust! Seven of them were men of literary taste, engaged in business, and married. At the period of the Poet's death, all were more than double his age, one only excepted' (pp. 45–47).[1]

The several accounts of Sommers, Campbell, and Stuart hold in them the gist of the whole problem, and pity, sympathy, unbidden tears, not flatulent moralising, go

[1] The reader will find Sommers verified by Alexander Campbell (Introduction, 1798), by Peter Stuart, editor of the *Star*, in his striking letter to Burns (Burns's Correspondence) — the latter recalling the Poet's 'richness of conversation' and 'felicitous manner' delightedly. Our limits forbid more than these references.

forth toward the child of genius, and hot wrath that none of those who extracted and exacted from him his 'company' and applauded the coruscation of his rare conversational powers (by universal testimony), and were thrilled by his exquisite singing of 'Auld Scotia's sangs,' was found to befriend him, or to guide and strengthen a naturally weak will and sway a naturally impulsive if not tempestuous temperament. I not only catch up Robert Burns's malediction—

> 'My curse upon your whinstane hearts,
> Ye Embrugh gentry,'

but think with heart-breaking compassion of what Robert Fergusson might have been made had he been fortunate enough to secure such a post as Willie Laidlaw's with Sir Walter, or Allan Cunningham's with Sir Francis Chantrey, and I the more poignantly think of this from an actual occurrence and opportunity that must now be told. Following on or accompanying the little volume of 1773, Fergusson published separately, without passing it through the *Weekly Magazine*, his longest poem, 'Auld Reekie.' It had prefixed to it this modest little dedication: 'To Sir William Forbes, Bart., this poem is most respectfully dedicated by his most obedient and very humble servant the Author.'

Forbes has been pseudo-canonised by no less than Sir Walter in *Marmion*, and Dr. Chambers has told pleasantly the story of his great 'Banking House' (1860), but posterity has not cared to remember the pompous, egotistical aristocrat, rather has accepted John Foster's vivisection of him in that tremendous *Eclectic Review* paper of his on his Life of Beattie. I cannot help myself in thinking contemptuously of this purse-proud and toadied man of wealth. He did some small service for old Alexander Ross, and he surprised me by admiring Beattie's guiltily scanty vernacular verse; but though he must have seen Fergusson's poems as they appeared in the *Weekly Magazine* and the volume of 1773 and this poem of 'Auld Reekie,' it is deplorable that he was too haughty to acknowledge a 'Poor Relation' (through his mother, Elizabeth Forbes), and took no notice of

> 'The poor ovation of a minstrel's praise,'

with the result that, unencouraged by his one sought-for patron, the design of 'Auld Reekie' was left uncompleted, and Canto 1st only slightly supplemented and corrected as it appeared in 1779. It is noticeable that copies of 'Auld Reekie' — including that in the British Museum (11632 c. 23)—exist, that lack the dedication, suggesting that the aggrieved Poet had cancelled it in remaining copies.

Our statement and exposure of Edinburgh social life, and authoritative refutation of Dr. David Irving's mendacities of caught-up rumour, have, I hope, justified my attitude toward Robert Fergusson.

I am making no speech for the defence (in legal phraseology); I am simply affirming psychological facts, and demanding that in any estimate or judgment the differentiation of physical and mental character be weighed in order to mitigate prejudice and severity and get at the truth. Moreover, the same problems are presented as in Fergusson, in Villon, Gautier, De Musset, and in our own Richard Savage, Thomas Chatterton, and shipwrecked Clarence Mangan, of whom Imogen Guiney warbles so exquisitely.

I close this chapter by emphasising points in our disproof. I affirm and write large that there was no 'habitual dissipation.' Two things stamp this charge out—the bed-rock fact of his continued employment in the Commissary-Depute's office to the end, *i.e.* till the tragedy came, and the very small cost of his ale and the like at his 'houffs.' There was nothing in the life of Robert Fergusson to warrant the hideous and unhappy words of Stevenson (even though appropriated by himself) of 'drunken' and 'vicious.' With reference to the latter, and Irving's representation that his associates led him down 'through all the stages of vice,' there is not one jot or tittle of evidence. In a time of licence and fast living no so-called love-liaisons ever came up against him, no 'woman's skaith' was ever laid at his door, no such salutations with defiance, of illegitimate offspring, as we mourn over in the greater Robert, no single polluting or profane line in all his verse, no dram-drinking during the day or office-hours, no drinking for the sake of the drink, no wasteful expenditure or allowing others to pay 'the bill,' no getting into debt.

It was therefore no degrading thraldom to 'strong drink,'

no giving way to base-gendered thirst, no helpless surrender to evil habit, no unregulated 'dissipation,' no consorting with 'dissolute' characters, but the attraction of kindred spirits and hearts, that drew Robert Fergusson to these foregatherings. And I must cry aloud that it was to these identical 'houffs' went the then *élite* of Edinburgh society, men who were born gentlemen and women who were 'fair ladies,' and none of them without a soul of goodness in all their evil and perchance broadness of speech. It is simply a FALSEHOOD that Robert Fergusson 'in a large measure neglected his profession'—Irving's slander. So far as he went wrong he was far more sinned against than sinning, was the victim, almost martyr of the Society of the period, and if I may not say with Goldsmith that all his '*failings leaned to Virtue's side*,' and much less appropriate Burns's strangely misunderstood words—

> 'The light that led astray
> Was light from Heaven,'

I yet find in native-born temperament and lifelong environment a solution of the problem that fills my mouth not with accusing or moralising platitudes, but dims my eyes with a mist of tears—

> '*If he had lived*, you say.—
> Well, well,—if he had lived, what then?
> Some men
> Will always argue,—yes, I know . . . of course
> The argument has force.
> *If he had lived*, he might have changed.—
> From bad to worse?
> Nay, my shrewd balance-setter,
> WHY NOT FROM GOOD TO BETTER?
> WHY NOT TO BEST? TO JOY,
> AND SPLENDOUR? OH, MY BOY!'
>
> T. E. BROWN ('Old John, and other Poems: Aber Stations.')

CHAPTER X

'BEGINNING OF THE END'—AND END

'What fair is wrought
Falls in the prime and passeth like a thought.'
DRUMMOND OF HAWTHORNDEN.

'What? Has Death come already? So soon! Impossible! . . . I have really not had time to do anything! I was just going to undertake.' IVAN TOURGIÉNEFF.

'My lodging is on the cold, cold ground.'—LEE.

THERE are anecdotes of Fergusson belonging to 1772–3 and 1774 that bring him before us in all the fun-loving and frolicsome humour of St. Andrews and of the street ballad-singing escapade. I cannot tarry to tell them in full, but may summarise. His landlord was crapulous, but nevertheless an unfailing observer of family worship, even when in a state most unfit. Our Poet to cure him, or at least in the hope of temporarily frightening him into sobriety, contrived to secrete himself in a neighbouring closet. As soon as the landlord began in loud tones a fervent prayer, there came from him a sepulchral rebuke for so daring to profane prayer by offering it in the condition in which he was. The effect was overwhelming, but—passed away. Another time Fergusson contrived to snatch from him a bundle of goods that he was stumblingly carrying to a customer, when as usual in a maudlin state of intoxication, and had them replaced in the shop with a letter from a notorious house warning him not to repeat such an outrage as to come to her rooms and insult her as he had done. The effect once more was overwhelming in the mingled shame and contrition and protests against the charge; but like the other it soon passed away. A third anecdote is that our Poet, dressed

and disguised as a sailor, threw himself into the company of certain sailor-acquaintances, and startled them by revelations of matters in their lives which they could not imagine any stranger knowing. When he had gained his end, he removed the disguises and stood forth in his own proper person, and a glorious night was spent.

All these perfectly innocent contrivances your sanctimonious, your 'unco guid' have distorted. They simply suggest abundant animal spirits, the boy's heart, the irrepressible humorist. A fourth anecdote, which represents Fergusson as scribbling a mocking epigram, and flinging it by a window into a Glassite chapel, I agree with Hugh Miller was done not by the Poet but by one who claimed to be an associate (*Recollections of Fergusson*).

These gleams of brightness were destined to be all too soon quenched. The stage darkens for a tragedy. I must now go forward to the final catastrophe—a catastrophe that makes the death of Robert Fergusson second only, if second, to that of his still younger contemporary, THOMAS CHATTERTON, as benignantly told by Sir Daniel Wilson and Professor David Masson.

Early in 1774 he was laid aside by some perilous attack. In the *Caledonian Mercury* of February 1774, there was a kindly notice of him—

'The admirers of Mr. Robert Fergusson, the celebrated poet, will be sorry to learn that he has had a very dangerous sickness.'

But very soon after, the *Weekly Magazine* had a verse-welcome wherein the joy of his admirers is proclaimed on again seeing 'part of themselves restored.' Alas! the restoration was only temporary. For again, in the *Caledonian Mercury* of 28th July 1774, I found this paragraph—

'Many lovers of poetry will feel regret to know that Mr. Robert Fergusson, the author of some of the most natural and humorous poems that have appeared of late years, has been seized with a very dangerous illness.'

Tidings of this had earlier gone to the Cape Club, and it is no common pleasure to me to reproduce here from my recovered entries in the Cape Club MSS. the following extremely creditable notice and resolution—

'At the Eighteenth Grand Festival, 2nd July 1774. In James

Mann's in Craig's Close on Saturday. It was agreed unanimously by the Grand Cape that the remainder of the Fines of the Absentees from the Meeting after paying what Extraordinary charges may attend the Game, shall be applied for the benefit and assistance of a young gentleman a member of the Cape, who has been a considerable time past in distress, and the gentlemen present in the Grand Cape made a contribution themselves for the same purpose.'

Then onward we read—

'Sept. 3rd, 1774. The Recorder intimated that the reason for the absence of the member Sir Precentor [Fergusson's title] was that he had been very ill.'[1]

Throughout, there were fluctuations in his illnesses, and it is not to be wondered at that the weakened bodily frame reacted on the mental. And yet the Scots poems up to the last show no loss of vigour, no decay of racy speech, no failure of inspiration. 1772 is marked as his advent, but 1773 if not 1774 brought advances on 'The Daft Days,' 'Elegy on the Death of Scots Music,' and the others. Nevertheless, there are measurelessly pathetic records that make it certain that, early in 1774—and noticeably his 'Last Will' and its 'Codicil,' which appeared in November and December of 1773, were his last known compositions—the 'sweet bells' were 'jangled out of tune and harsh.' Anecdotes in tragic proof have been put into print—the sorrowfullest of all, surely unthinkingly, by Professor William Tennant—bewraying undoubted mental 'imbecility' though still possessed of sound common sense otherwise. I have not the heart to re-tell them. Their telling gives me the same shudder and loathing that I experienced when I first read Trelawney's infamous desecration in lifting the coffin-shroud of dead Byron, and his account of what he saw of that 'deformity' that so tortured that proud soul. I simply state the fact. The shadows deepened, broadened, and blackened. The hitherto alert brain grew confused. Among the first results of a little lightening of the cloud, he collected every scrap of his manuscripts—poetical and all—and indiscriminately committed them to the flames. He was overheard to say, 'There is one thing I am glad of; I have never written a line against religion.' Let that be held in

[1] I regret that a number of fresh entries from the Cape Club MSS. are crushed out.'

recollection. Robert Fergusson did not fall in with the *mode* led by contemporary David Hume of mocking at all seriousness, nor did he so much as once write lines he would have wished to blot. Had there been the 'dissoluteness' so cruelly and falsely charged, it must have come out. It never did.

He appeared in the streets in the summer once or twice. Once or twice, too, he called on the Ruddimans; but, though there were gleams of his old brightness of look and speech, he was on the whole sad and grave. Speedily the gleam was swallowed up of darkness: for it was during the later months that the incidents indicated took place. But *at this point* it is necessary to correct a statement, and an inference from it, of an occurrence that Thomas Sommers expressly affirms, from personal knowledge and intercourse with Fergusson immediately preceding and succeeding the alleged meeting, took place two years before. It is that, on a casual visit to Haddington churchyard, he was met by the Rev. John Brown—*clarum et venerabile nomen*—and was so solemnly and awfully spoken to by him on 'death and eternity' as to have been driven to despair.

Accrediting this, R. L. Stevenson, it will be remembered, ascribes Fergusson's madness to having been 'pestered' with a 'damnatory creed'—an utter delusion. It is all a —fiction. The character of John Brown of Haddington gives assurance that anything he might say would be wise, fitting, and kindly. At anyrate, it made no such evil impression on Fergusson. He returned as he went from Haddington his own bright self—doubtless remembering, but not to distress him, paternal counsels of an under-shepherd ever faithfully on the watch to 'speak a word in season.' *I repeat and accentuate, this interview was in* 1772—*not* 1774. I would also state that John Brown of Haddington, so far from having been a grim, uncompromisingly orthodox Calvinist, was large-hearted, and relished exchange of pleasantry by his own friends and in intercourse with his fellow-men, and not less his Horace.

Whilst thus in July sequestered, a gloom as of the cave of Despair fell upon him. The Bible—his mother's gift-Bible when he went off to the Grammar School of Dundee—became his sole companion from morning to noon, and

from noon to night. His posthumous paraphrase on Job chap. iii., that contains the couplet which so spoke home—as we saw—to dying Robert Burns—

> 'Say, wherefore has an over-bounteous Heaven
> Light to the comfortless and wretched given?'

and his similarly posthumous odes to 'Horror' and to 'Disappointment,' reveal to us the thoughts that haunted him. In these, JOHN MARTIN like, we are shown the lurid sky that bent over him, by lightning rather than light.

The final act of the tragedy was heralded by one of those casual things that so frequently hold in them disproportionate potency. While keeping within doors he had, in the room adjoining that in which he slept, a favourite starling. It had been a gift from a very dear friend in the country. One night a cat having found its way down the chimney (so it was reported) seized the poor bird. Its piteous cries awoke Fergusson. He rose hurriedly, and discovered the cause of the alarm, but too late to save his songster-pet.

This occurrence was a double seizure. It literally 'seized' his imagination. Sleep was banished for the rest of the night. Words in St. Luke xii. 39 sprang upon his retentive memory—'*I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.*' He reasoned as he brooded over the sudden destruction of his victim-starling—how sudden and how fatal had been the stroke to a 'sinless and unaccountable creature.' 'And he'—'*what if Death should come thus suddenly on him, to whom such an event was not to obtain oblivion but the passage to a state of everlasting misery or happiness?*' Giving way to such thoughts that doubtless were started the more readily amidst the stillness of the night after the pitiful screams of the perishing bird, the morning found him '*wrought up to a pitch of remorse bordering on despair.*' He rose, resolved no more to mix with the 'social and the gay'—ghastly to him now—but to be a recluse, devoured by reflections on 'past follies' and—as he moaned, '*an aimless, irresolute, misspent life*'—broken words surely not to be pressed against him! All his natural vivacity forsook him. Those lips that had never opened but to charm were now shut as by an unseen Gorgon. With a peculiar, wild, entreating, accusing look, he refused

all invitations out. Religion was now his only theme, and, as we have before stated, his mother's gift-Bible his constant companion. And so with only brief intervals of respite—respite that meant only postponement, not deliverance—the cloud broadened and lowered with no crimson fire within it. Emphatically he was 'walking in darkness and *seeing no light*.'

> 'His life was cold, and dark, and dreary,
> It rained, and the wind was never weary;
> His thoughts still clung to the mouldering Past,
> But the hopes of youth fell thick on the blast,
> And the days were dark and dreary.'

Thus passed the long days and nights of, I fear, most of 1774; and it is mournful to think that one so dowered, so right-hearted, so gentle, so modest, so loveable, so (I reiterate) sinned against rather than sinning in his fitful compliances with the exactions of Society, should thus have been robbed of the brilliant hopes that had shed their radiance over him on his advent as a vernacular poet when he sang so unforgettably—

> 'Like thee, by Fancy wing'd, the Muse
> Scuds ear' an' heartsome ower the dews,
> Fu' vogie, an' fu' blythe to crap
> The winsome flow'rs frae Nature's lap;
> Twining her living garlands there,
> That lyart Time can ne'er impair.'
> ('Ode to the Bee.')

Yes: and others had shared these hopes—

> 'There were
> Who form'd high hopes, and flattering ones, of thee,
> Young Robert! For thine eye was quick to speak
> Each opening feeling: *should they not have known*
> If the rich rainbow on the morning cloud
> Reflects its radiant dyes, the husbandman
> Beholds the ominous glory, and foresees
> Impending storm?'

Even after the sorrowful season that I have had to describe, he must have visited some friends; for the final blow fell when he was absent from his own room. Thomas Sommers tells us that, about two months before his death, he was spending an evening with a few friends when, in preparing to return home, his feet caught in a stair-carpet

knob and he was precipitated to the bottom along steep narrow steps. He must have been frightfully hurt about the head, for he bled profusely. When borne home to his mother's house he could give no account of what had happened, being unconscious—much as later (1794) James Bruce of Kinnaird was destined to be on a similar stumbling accident—through concussion and, it is suspected, lesion of the brain.

Toward morning, consciousness revived, but with it his former illusions. He would yet be heard of as a great preacher of the glorious gospel of the blessed God. Ultimately, he grew extremely violent — 'furious' is Sommers's term—so much so that poor, thin creature though he was, it took three strong persons to control him—his violence and seeming strength in pitiful contrast with his actual weakness from loss of blood. Broken fragments of his speech are heart-breaking to think of.

His mother being still left to moil and toil by her cold-hearted and miserly brother — that 'uncle' whose name must for ever stink in the annals of Scottish literature—had no means or place whereby to see to her darling son's welfare. She had to earn her daily bread. She had to wait on her lodgers in her spared rather than really spare room. And so there was nothing for it but removal to the one wretched Asylum for the insane then in Edinburgh.

As too often has been done—but perhaps excusably—a ruse had to be resorted to to get him quietly to the place, at the West Bow, Bristo Port — the house being called the Schelles (or Cells); which seems to have been a kind of appanage to the old Darien House, and which itself had been degraded into the Workhouse for paupers.

'On pretence of taking him in the evening to visit a friend, he was put into a sedan chair,' and carried to the place (described contemporarily as 'a gloomy sequestered mansion'). When the sedan chair was set down in the narrow lobby, Fergusson instantly detected the decoy and fraud—showing restored sanity—and gave a great cry. Thomas Sommers states that it was 'answered by shrieks from other wretched captives in the house.' (Sime and T. G. Stevenson's 'Views of Old Edinburgh' preserve for us 'The Cells,' south-east corner of the Darien House grounds.)

The fact of his instantaneous recognition of his entrapping goes to our hearts to-day. During the first night

of his confinement, he slept none. When, in the morning, the keeper visited him, he found him 'walking along the stone floor of his cell, with his arms folded and in sullen sadness uttering not a word.'

'After some minutes, he clapped his right hand on his forehead and complained much of pain.' He asked the keeper 'who brought him there?' Being answered 'friends,' he replied, 'Yes, friends indeed! they think I am too wicked to live, but you will see me "a burning and a shining light."' 'You have been so already,' answered the kindly keeper. 'You mistake me,' said Fergusson. 'I mean you shall see me and hear of me as a bright minister of the gospel.' 'I shall be happy to see that day indeed,' again replied Forrest, the keeper.

I care not to prolong the narrative. Thomas Sommers gives an account of a visit of himself and a famous medical man of the day, Dr. John Aitken, whereon the latter was hopeful of a complete and perfect recovery. Certainly the conversations reported during more than an hour indicated perfect sanity. And yet—and yet the terrible 'jangle' of the 'sweet bells' of reason was there. For on one occasion when he had been reading, a cloud overshadowing the moon, he demanded that Jupiter should 'snuff the moon,' as though it had been some vast candle. On another occasion, having plaited a crown very neatly from the straws of his cell, he proclaimed himself a—king.[1] But now he was calm and composed. I let his simple-hearted early biographer and friend speak for me:—

'We got immediate access to the cell, and found Robert lying with his clothes on, stretched upon a bed of loose uncovered straw. The moment he heard my voice, he instantly arose—got me in his arms and wept. The doctor felt his pulse and declared it to be favourable. I asked the keeper (whom I formerly knew as a gardener) to allow him to accompany us into an adjoining back court, by way of taking the air. He consented. Robert told hold of me by the arm, placing me on his right and the doctor on his left, and in this form we walked backward and forward along the court, conversing for nearly an hour; in the course of which many questions were asked at him both by the doctor and myself, to which he returned most satisfactory answers, and seemed very anxious to obtain his liberty. The sky was lowering, the sun being much obscured. Led by curiosity and knowing his natural

[1] Possibly the Poet—who knew the dramatists well—had heard Nat Lee's song 'With a garland of straw will I crown thee my love' (Mr. W. Keith-Leask).

quickness, I asked him what hour of the day it might be? He stopped, and looking up, with his face towards the south, while his hands were clasped, paused a little, and said it was within five minutes of twelve. The doctor looked his watch, and exclaimed, "It is just six minutes to twelve."'

Other details follow, which may be omitted. Sommers then proceeds—

'Having passed about two hours with him on this visit, we found it necessary to take our leave, the doctor assuring him that he would soon be restored to his friends, and that I would visit him again in a day or two. He calmly and without a murmur walked with us to the cell, and upon parting, he reminded the doctor [of his promise] to get him soon at liberty, and of mine to see him next day' (pp. 33–36).

The promised second visit of Sommers was prevented by pressure of business, and he did not see the Poet again. But a still more sadly interesting and pathetic thing has been recorded, viz. that he would sing the 'Birks of Invermay' and other Scottish melodies with a pathos and sweetness never surpassed in his days of full health. But these and other like incidents were but as

'Moonlight on a troubled sea,
Brightening the storm it cannot calm.'

It is due to Sommers, to Dr. Aitken, the Ruddimans, and others from the Cape Club, to keep in recollection that Fergusson was not, as some of his moralising biographers have asserted, '*forsaken of all his friends*,' and left unvisited. Especially—and with this I shall close our (to me) heart-trying story—it is to be made known that his last visitors were his good mother and sister Margaret (Mrs. Duval). Campbell and Sommers have preserved particulars that few I should think can read with unwet eyes. The evening was chilly and damp. It was October. His feet, he said, felt very cold, and he asked his mother to gather up the (poor) bedclothes and sit upon them. She did so. He looked wistfully at his mother, and said, 'Oh, mother, this is kind indeed,' but again complained that his feet were 'cold, cold.' Turning to his sister, he asked—

'Might you not frequently come and sit by me thus—you cannot imagine how comfortable it would be—you might fetch your seam and sew beside me.' An interval of silence was filled up with sobs and

tears. 'What ails ye? Wherefore sorrow for me?' he said. 'I am very well cared for here—I do assure you I want for nothing, but it is cold—it is very cold.' Again he said, 'You know I told you it would come to this at last: yes, I told you.' The keeper gave a signal for retirement, and his mother and sister rising, he cried, 'Oh, do not go yet, mother! I hope to be soon— Oh, do not go yet—do not leave me.'

But the allotted time was up, and they had to pass out. They parted; and in the silence and darkness of that same night, alone with The Alone, he died. This event took place on 16th October 1774, when he had only a few weeks completed his twenty-fourth year.

The poor wasted and worn body was placed in a suitable coffin, and a 'large company,' Thomas Sommers informs us, gathered at the West Bow and laid what was mortal of him in the churchyard of the Canongate, from whose burial-register I give this entry—

'1774. October 19. Robert Fergusson, Writer in Edinburgh: outside of Hay's burying-place. 24 years.'

This reveals that he was interred in the same grave with his father.

A twofold sequel adds to the unutterable sorrowfulness of this so utterly unlooked-for end of the young life. The first is that his mother, just after seeing him (as described), received a letter from her sailor-son 'Hary,' from the United States, enclosing a sum of money whereby she would have been enabled to bring her 'laddie' back again to their 'ain hame.' Then, almost immediately on the back of this, a letter for the dead young Poet reached, enclosing a draft for fully £100, with an urgent invitation that he—Fergusson—would join the sender in India, when his future would be secure. To the undying honour of that sender, I rejoice to be able to add, that when informed of his friend's recent death and the whole circumstances, he insisted on Mrs. Fergusson's keeping every penny of the draft. Miss Ruddiman remembered her tears of gratitude as she told their family of this additional generosity.

Hitherto this beautiful incident has only been known as having been done by a 'Mr. Burnett.' Irving and the rest who tell it never seem to have so much as tried

to get at more than the name. Thanks to the sympathetic seconding of my searches and researches by several helpers, I have recovered interesting data, whereby I can ask, even at this late day, that honour may be done to the 'Great Heart' type of Scot—all the more that though he survived Fergusson until 1826, he never sought to proclaim on the 'house-top' what he had purposed and planned, and generously proceeded to do. His one lifelong regret was that his intended help came 'too late.'

The 'Mr. Burnett' was John Burnett, Esq., of Elrick, Aberdeenshire. He was fourth son of John Burnett of Elrick, merchant in Aberdeen—bailie in 1762; later, Dean of Guild—and Margaret Strachan his wife. He was baptized on 28th July 1745 (being about five years older, therefore, than Fergusson), and was taught book-keeping and arithmetic by A. Sinclair, Aberdeen. In 1762 he petitioned for a writership in the East India Company's service. His application was granted, and he was appointed to Fort Marlborough (in Sumatra), where he arrived in 1763, when Fergusson was at the Grammar School, Dundee. The lists of the Company's servants at this time are few and brief. In one published in 1768, John Burnett's name appears as 'factor' on the Fort Marlborough establishment, and assistant at Nattal (on the west coast of Sumatra). By 1771 he had reached the grade of Senior Merchant, still retaining his post at Nattal, which, however, he had relinquished by 1778. The list of 1780 shows him 'at home.' From the Court minutes it appears that he postponed his return to his official duties from time to time on the plea of ill-health, until in October 1784 he was ordered either to proceed to his post or resign. No further particulars have been traced in the books of the Company. So far the public books of the great Company, but on further examination, at the request for me of Lord Aldenham, it was found not only that John Burnett had been transferred to Bencoolen (in Sumatra), but the entry of the actual sending of the draft was come upon. I reproduce *literatim* this most satisfying 'find':[1]—

[1] I have also cordially to acknowledge the persistent painstaking of the custodiers of these old 'Company' records.

'EXTRACT FROM THE GENERAL CASH JOURNAL OF THE UNITED COMPANY OF MERCHANTS OF ENGLAND TRADING TO THE EAST INDIES.

July 1774 London
By Factory at Bencoolen to Cash
paid Bills of Exchange drawn from thence, viz.
Date of Bill
date 16th Colin Donaldson 18th Sepr. 1772 Dolls. 378 : – 50 @ 5s./6d.
Paid in there by
John Burnett £103 : 19. 8. Placed July 1774, assigned 16th October 1774.'

I am informed that this was the then roundabout mode of transmitting money—getting hold of bills as near the amount desired as possible—and that the odd £3, 19s. 8d. was an intentional over-amount in order that the complete £100 might reach Fergusson.

I regret that after continuous and laborious local inquiries, I have failed to get at the link that unites John Burnett of Elrick with Fergusson. But it seems pretty certain that his father was the Aberdeen 'merchant' with whom the Poet's father 'served,' and that it was in remembrance of 'the house of Saul' that this kindness was shown to the son, albeit it would also seem that John Burnett in far-off Sumatra must have got Ruddiman's *Weekly Magazine*, and leapt to the advent of the new poet from 'The Daft Days' onward. Biographers have said Burnett was a schoolfellow, but I have come on no verification of this.

Supplementary to this fine record is a hitherto unknown fact, viz. that not long subsequent to her son's death, Mrs. Fergusson re-married comfortably — as before her, Allan Ramsay's mother had done. I have not been successful in tracing the date of her second marriage; but in the Canongate Church Register of her burial this is the unmistakable entry, now like so many other things for *the first time* recorded—

'1782. April 19. Elizabeth Forbes, relict of Alexander Davidson, bookseller in Edinburgh, opposite James Smith's burying-place. Aged 80 years.'

There is no doubt of this 'Elizabeth Forbes' having been our Poet's mother; for, as our also first-time printed burial-entry of his father shows, this is one of three Fergusson

entries in the one Register; albeit the age eighty must be a clerical error, as she was certainly born on 6th March 1714, in the other. In 1774, when Fergusson died, she was thus in her sixtieth year—a noticeable fact, and evidence that the 'douce' burgess of Edinburgh, Alexander Davidson, bookseller, knew her worth, and married her for love, not 'siller.' What a contrast between the two ages!—1750–1774! 1714–1782! More amazing still, Robert Fergusson cut off in the hey-day of his youth and hope—'Jamie Duff,' the idiot of whom he sang, left to drag out his blank existence until 1789—he having been contemporary with all the three—Allan Ramsay, Robert Fergusson, and Robert Burns!

Of Fergusson's personal appearance Sommers has left the following account—

'He was about five feet six inches high, and well shaped. His complexion fair, but rather pale. His eyes full, black, and piercing. His nose long, his lips thin, his teeth well set and white. His neck long and well proportioned. His shoulders narrow, and his limbs long, but more sinewy than fleshy. His voice strong, clear, and melodious. Remarkably fond of old Scots songs, and the best singer of the "Birks of Invermay" I ever heard. When speaking, he was quick, forcible, and complaisant. In walking he appeared smart, erect, and unaffected' (p. 45). 'His countenance,' says another (Chambers, as before, who himself did not of course personally know him as Sommers did), 'was somewhat effeminate [he means 'feminine'], but redeemed by the animation imparted to it by his large black eyes. Mingled with the penetrative glance of an acute and active mind, was that modesty which gives to superior intellect its greatest charm.'

With reference to the twice-repeated notice of his 'black' eyes Miss Ruddiman told me that they were rather blue-black, and I never understood what she meant until I chanced upon Fiona Macleod's portraiture of Marcus Mac Codrum (Gilanmor) of Uist, '*tall, broad-shouldered, with yellow hair, and strangely dark blue-black eyes*' (*The Dan-Nan-Ron*, p. 160): (2) Eilidh McIian tie Birdeen, '*her changing hazel eyes, now grey-green, now dusked with sea-gloom . . . her wonderful arched eyebrows dark so that they seemed black*' (*Tie Birdeen*, p. 277). The portrait by Alexander Runciman now as a 'loan' in the National Portrait Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh, from the Misses Raeburn—inherited from Fergusson's co-member of the Cape Club, Sir Henry Raeburn, our Scottish Sir Joshua Reynolds—agrees with this, being blue shining through black, or black with a blue

sheen. I regard the face as in every way a striking one and touched of the beautiful.[1]

Such is the story of Robert Fergusson — and before passing forward to assign his place among the vernacular Singers of Scotland (in next chapter) it must be permitted me to hark back on our interpretation of his young life to which I have been gradually leading up my readers. I have striven to keep before myself these words of George Eliot—

'It was the fashion of old, when an ox was led out for sacrifice to Jupiter, to chalk the dark spots to give the offering a false show of unblemished whiteness. Let us fling away the chalk and boldly say—The victim is spotted.'

I have not attempted to conceal that there were 'black spots' that no whitest or thickest chalk could cover even if I had wished to try. I concede that born almost certainly to delicate health and sickliness of constitution and impetuosity of sensibility, he was natively irresolute and infirm of will and a day-dreamer. I have recognised that it was yoking a steed of the sun to almost a dung-cart to set him to the poor 'drudgery' of the Commissary-Clerk's office and 'copying' mechanically such documents as were demanded. I have equally recognised that his sudden introduction into the social life of Edinburgh of the period—frivolous, unthinking, self-centred, heartless, as it was, in its patronage of genius after its sorry fashion—exercised a disturbing not to say delirious fascination over him in its exchange of his poor rooms in Warriston's Close and 'Jamieson's Land,' and that he was no miraculous exception to the drinking usages of such Society from highest and sacredest to humblest, and whether in nut-brown ale or flowing claret. But all this conscience-ruled recognition must be tempered and sweetened by recognition likewise of the conditions under which Robert Fergusson hasted through the brief closing years (1772–74) of his young life. 'The Daft Days' did not appear until January 2nd, 1772, and his 'Last Will' and its 'Codicil' on November 25th and December 2nd, 1773, so that his literary life in so far as it was famous—for the English

[1] I have had this inestimable portrait exquisitely photogravured by Young of Edinburgh, to range with Walker's Nasmyth Burns (private plate).

poems, commenced on Feburary 7th, 1771, do not count—was covered by scarcely twelve months. Manifestly he was not the make of man for such an atmosphere as during this fateful year he breathed, and to me it is unspeakably affecting to take note of his numerous retreats from the city to the country—to pleasant Broomhouse (near Corstorphine), a health-resort once renowned for its medicinal well and 'cream,' as it is still for its idyllic loveliness of scenery and treasured monuments in the 'auld kirk' (not forgetting the old 'makker,' Sir John Rowll) — to North Belton (near Dunbar) — to Dumfries — to Haddington — to Restalrig—to Drumelzier—to St. Andrews and Fife—that he might escape and be his true self. I ask and re-ask recognition of this inward struggle. I ask recognition of the depth of the moral problem of resistance and overcoming, set us in him. I ask that we shall never for a moment forget that here was an admitted child of genius with an exquisitely strung nature physically sickly from the outset. I ask that it be realised that by temperament he was sensitive to every mood—now touched with Robert Burns's melancholia and now of feminine vivacity if not loquacity—an Æolian harp his symbol. I ask that it be taken into account that brilliant conversation was to him the life of his life. I ask that it be further remembered that it could not but be a release to pass from the mechanical drudgery of the Commissary-Clerk's office and the necessitated bareness of his mother's poor home in 'Jamieson's Land' to the gaiety and brightness of club or tavern or oyster-cellar. I ask yet again that it be co-equally remembered that there was the attraction of manifold opportunity of exercising his faculty of keen observation of human nature, his swift satiric wit, his racy speech; nor less must we keep in mind that he was instinctively waggish and up to all manner of unharming mischief, and not at all one to study or to seek to fend himself from misconstruction of solemn foes and 'unco guid'—former days Mrs. Grundys. Let these things be combined and grasped, and that twenty-four years rounded with a sleep his life, and the man (I cannot imagine a woman) must be of a hard heart, and worse, who refuses our apportionment of responsibility or our claim for sympathy, not platitudinary moralising, for Robert

Fergusson. I deny that Irving's cruel and unpardonable phrases of 'habitual dissipation' and the like, and 'dissolute associates,' are true of him. I postulate that he was—if I may be excused returning on my own words—the victim of the manners (ethically) of the time. I must likewise with Mrs. Hugh Miller crown all with the authenticated fact that like WILLIAM COLLINS, the 'one book' of dying Sir Walter,—who forgets his 'There is but one, Lockhart'?—was his inseparable companion, so that in her womanly words—

'Fergusson's deathbed on the heaven-ward side was not dark. The returning reason, the comforts of the Word of Life, are glimpses of God's providence and grace that shine gloriously amid the utter darkness of those depths' (Preface to *Tales and Sketches*, p. x).

As I read the broken words of the two Roberts—Robert Fergusson and his mightier successor, Robert Burns — in their ultimate sore travail of spirit, I find myself fired with indignation against your bigots and Pharisees who so exclaim against them as to all intents and purposes to affirm the impotence of the grace of God and God of grace to 'save to the uttermost' and His blessed and not human but preter-human forgivingness, 'your sins and your iniquities' of the Past '*I shall remember no more.*' Then—as before I have put it—within the larger there is a lesser problem psychologically—how far the All-wise and All-righteous and more than humanly pitiful holds a man responsible for the complexities and driving forces of the constitution and temperament with which he is born and in which he grows up; how far He 'weighs' the rush of temptation on a susceptibility and responsiveness to which your cold, unimpassioned natures are strangers; how far He 'remembers' compassionately the terrible spell of, I re-affirm, the unquestionable '*pleasures* of sin.' Does God, ye orthodox of orthodox divines, take no account of heredity, and that heredity striven against to madness?

Alas! alas! alas! One's heart is sore to-day over the tragedy of 'the Schelles.'

'Swift and sudden fell the night;
Few the reverent tears that rose,
O'er the young life's mournful close;
And scarce the loud world's wrestling throng
Missed the woodland's silenc'd song.'
(MRS. H. W. PHILLIPS.)

CHAPTER XI

THE POETRY OF FERGUSSON IN RELATION TO BURNS—CLAIM FOR HIS RIGHTFUL PLACE

'And though that I, amang the lave,
Unworthy be ane place to have,
Or in their nummer to be tald,
Als lang in mynd my wark sall hald,
Als haill in every circumstance,
In forme, in matter and substance,
But[1] wearing or consumption,
Rust, canker, or corruption,
As ony of their warkes all,
Suppose that my reward be small.'

WILLIAM DUNBAR.

HAVING now told more fully than might have been expected at this late day, and after so many meagre biographies, the chequered story of the short life of Robert Fergusson, it remains that I vindicate the modest claim that I mean to make for him of a place in the proud roll of vernacular Scottish poets. I begin by fortifying this claim with a little poem by one of his own maternal clan—the lamented Professor Edward Forbes—which though not, perhaps, without faults, seems to me admirably to present *the* thought that ought to rule us in working-out more especially the relation of his young precursor to Robert Burns. This is the first thing that I propose to deal with, not at all—need I say—with any idea of charging the mightier with plagiarism, but in order to verify Robert Burns's own abundant acknowledgments of obligation to Fergusson, and to establish the continuity of our Scottish poetry, and indeed of our Scottish literature as a whole.

[1] = without.

A Night Scene.

'A night-sky over-head:
One solitary star
Shining amid
A little track of blue—for dark clouds hid
Its sister sunlets; on its azure bed
It seemed a sun, for there
No jealous planet shone with which it to compare.

The dark clouds rolled away,
And all heaven's shining train
Of suns and stars,
With the great moon, beamed forth their gorgeous light:
Where then was that fair star that shone so bright?
Where was it? None could say.
Yet there it doubtless was, although it seemed away.

So lustrous shall we find
Each living soul
When seen alone:
And though when brighter spirits round it press,
We lose its form and doubt its loveliness,
Still should we bear in mind
That it is not less bright although it be outshined.'
(*Memoir*, by Wilson and Geikie, 1861, p. 257.)

Andrew Lang caught up this exquisite fancy when, at a Burns anniversary dinner in Edinburgh in 1891, he had the courage of his opinion to say—

'Some people are inclined to ask—Are we quite sure that we are worshipping the right poet? It is true that there are many poets, and I sometimes yield so far to the suggestion as to think that we might worship some of them a little more than we do. There is Fergusson, Burns's master, who died at twenty-four, a true poet, but so unfortunate after death as in life, that I doubt if we have a proper critical edition of Fergusson, and certainly we have not such an account of his life as might well be written.'[1]

This recognised over-shadowing of Fergusson by Robert Burns seems to dictate the fundamental thing that I have already announced as first and foremost, viz. *an attempt to settle the amount and quality of obligation on the part of successor to young forerunner, and to demonstrate the relation and inter-relation and influence of the* 1773 *book on the* 1786–7 *volume.* This has only been done hitherto vaguely

[1] Mr. Lang was good enough to write me that then he had never chanced to meet with my 1851 edition.

and perfunctorily. Undue weight has been attached to Sir Walter's reminiscent opinion, that Burns seemed to him to speak with exaggerated gratitude of his indebtedness to Fergusson and Ramsay, in forgetfulness that great-heart Scott was but a 'laddie' of some twelve or thirteen years at the time of his only meeting with him, and so demonstratively, in long subsequently recalling the overheard words he must have imported into them his own later opinion and criticism. More recently, perhaps, no misjudgment has gone more deep toward under-valuation of Fergusson than that of our great and noble Thomas Carlyle, in his incomparably true and splendid essay on Burns. But the hastiest consideration of the context will convince that in this instance the illustrious essayist spoke from un-acquaintance—I shrink from the word ignorance—or mis-recollection of the poetry of Dunbar, Lyndsay, and Montgomery of earlier, and of Ramsay and Fergusson of later times, and that the thesis of Burns's autochthonalness and independence of all predecessors, and of Fergusson specifically, is an extremely shallow reading of the origins and progress of at once Scottish poetry and the poetry—greatest of all—of Robert Burns. But his characteristic letter to me on Ramsay and Fergusson (c. i.) atones for his earlier blundering. It is uncritical to sever the greater from the lesser, and to regard Burns's poetry as a stream unfed of other streams; and yet that is what Thomas Carlyle did.

I postulate now—that both Burns himself and his level-headed brother, Gilbert Burns, made specific acknowledgment of specific obligation to Fergusson. Take that to begin with, though it is the most superficial and obvious of all. 'The Cotter's Saturday Night' sends us at once to two main sources—overpassing slighter—'The Farmer's Ingle' mainly, and subordinately or for form, Shenstone's delightful 'Schoolmistress.' 'The Farmer's Ingle' every-one knows, and by turning to it anyone can see for him-self how Burns fetched the living water of inspiration from Fergusson's (so to say) hill-side spring. 'Leith Races' with its opening vision of 'Mirth' sends us again to the 'Holy Fair' and its opening vision of 'Fun,' 'Superstition,' and 'Hypocrisy'—visions which in this instance Angellier

strangely misunderstands—as inevitably as it does to James Nicol's 'Kern Supper' and its vision of the 'youthfu' Muse.' The immortal 'Elegy on Captain Matthew Henderson' sends us once more not to black-letter ballads of which Burns never had heard, spite of Sir Walter's notion, but to discover that it is only a magnificent expansion of 'Elegy on the Death of Scots Music.' 'The Twa Brigs' similarly sends us to 'The Ghaists: a Kirkyard Eclogue' and 'The Mutual Complaint of Plainstanes and Causey.' So is it through others of the most imperishable of the woven stuff of Burns's verse-loom,—*e.g.*, 'Twa Dogs,' 'Tam o' Shanter,' 'Jolly Beggars,'—as shall appear in the sequel.

It will not be gainsayed, I hope, that in these typical instances it was Robert Fergusson's several poems that led Robert Burns to write his; or, if anyone choose to put it, that Robert Burns when he was inspired to write 'The Cotter's Saturday Night,' 'Holy Fair,' 'Elegy on Captain Matthew Henderson'—to recapitulate only three—inevitably remembered Robert Fergusson.

This first thing is within the truth of our claim; but, after all, whilst it is Fergusson's undying glory in these specific instances to have been the inspirer of Robert Burns in suggesting subjects and giving models, yet these do not reveal the weightier debt. These—as I have already put it—lie on the surface, and are at once recognisable and recognised. But it is when we go beneath the surface and dig deep that we discover how interpenetrative as the veining of the marble, not superficial, was Fergusson's influence; that his metrical forms became Burns's metrical forms; his rhymes and rhythms became Burns's rhymes and rhythms. Though alike in form and rhyme and rhythm, Fergusson in his turn had inherited them from Dunbar and Lyndsay, Montgomery and Semple, Ramsay and Hamilton of Gilbertfield, his vocabulary and phrases and felicitous lines largely became Burns's, and superseded his own Ayrshire dialectal words. His finest observation of nature and human nature, his most ebullient humour, his rarest insight into character, his sudden darts of emotion now of wrath and now of ruth, perpetually reflect Fergusson.

Fergusson's influence was diffused and interfused. I now proceed to show this in detail.

The interfused influence of Fergusson, I think, often comes out in unexpected places and from relatively unremarkable poems. This I wish to emphasise, for it demonstrates how the volume of 1773–79 had gone into the very blood as well as memory of Burns, and that not as iron but as enriching ozone.

I have pronounced on the English poems that in their aggregate they were poor—conventional in thought and feeling and form. Nevertheless, Robert Burns let none of them escape him, nay, self-evidently must have learned them by heart (to adopt the fine Scottish phrase). Lines, stanzas, from the English poems occur and recur, and there is that final remembrance on his deathbed to which I have more than once referred, of the pathetic paraphrase on Job chap. iii. :—

> 'Say, wherefore has an over-bounteous Heaven
> Light to the comfortless and wretched given?'

I point out as confirmatory of this element of influence, the plain source of one of the most noticeable of the stanzas of 'The Cotter's Saturday Night,' apart from 'The Farmer's Ingle'—

> 'Tremble, O Albion! for the voice of Fate
> Seems ready to decree thy after-fall.
> By pride, by luxury, what fatal ills
> Unheeded have approach'd thy mortal frame;
> How many foreign weeds their heads have rear'd
> In thy fair garden! Hasten, ere their strength
> And baneful vegetation taint the soil,
> To root out rank disease, which soon must spread,
> If no bless'd antidote will purge away
> *Fashion's proud minions from our sea-girt isle.*'
> ('Fashion.')

This is admittedly meagre, but its very meagreness is precious critically as revealing how splendidly Burns transfigures the humbler lines of his predecessor and gives them vigour and resonance—reminding us of how Sir Walter similarly takes *Claudero's* 'Humphrey Colquhoun's Farewell' and crystallises its coarseness (as frost crystallises foulest water) into the lyric of Mary in *The Pirate*, sung by '*Claud* Halcro.'

Let us now read st. 20 of 'The Cotter's Saturday Night'—

'O Scotia! my dear, my native soil!
For whom my warmest wish to Heaven is sent!
Long may thy hardy sons of rustic toil
Be blest with health, and peace, and sweet content!
And, oh! may Heaven their simple lives prevent
From Luxury's contagion, weak and vile!
Then, howe'er crowns and coronets be rent,
A virtuous populace may rise the while,
And stand a wall of fire around their much-lov'd Isle.'

Nor is this all in 'The Cotter's Saturday Night' again apart from 'The Farmer's Ingle.' Fergusson's 'Retirement' has this stanza—

'For the calm comforts of an easy mind,
In yonder lowly cot delight to dwell,
And leave the statesman for the lab'ring hind,
The regal palace for the humble cell.'
(*Works*, 1851, p. 195.)

I place beside this a couplet from the same 'Cotter's Saturday Night'—

'Certes in fair Virtue's heavenly road
The cottage leaves the palace far behind.'

This line of observation, viz. Burns's recollection of Fergusson's poorest English poems, his absolute absorption of them, is perhaps still more demonstrated in this that (as I think) he fetched his pseudonymous name for his Platonically wooed Mrs. Maclehose, from the commonplace poem of 'Fashion' above quoted—

'Amongst the proud attendants of this shrine,
The wealthy, young and gay CLARINDA draws
From poorer objects, the astonish'd eye.'

So, too, *Souter Johnny* was long preceded by *Souter Jock* in 'The Election'—a poem that colours several of Burns's, as he who runs may read. It is the more certain that the name *Souter* Jock caught on from Burns's reading of Fergusson in that 'Tam o' Shanter's' *Souter* Johnny was no 'souter' or shoemaker at all, but a farm-hand.

The influence of Fergusson on Burns, however, will be still more revealed to the '*eident*' student of his vernacular poems. His boyish Elegy on the death of Professor David Gregory thus opens—

'Now mourn, ye college masters a'!
And frae your ein a tear lat fa',
Fam'd Gregory death has taen awa'
Without remeid;
The skaith ye've met wi's nae that sma',
Sin Gregory's dead.'

Conceded, as our Poet with characteristic modesty reminded his over-flattering admirer John Scott (?), Ramsay and Hamilton of Gilbertfield had used this form from their '*forbear*' fellow-makers; none the less, who can mistake the source of this—

'Lament in rhyme, lament in prose,
Wi' saut tears trickling down your nose;
Our bardie's fate is at a close,
Past a' remeid;
The last sad cap-stane of his woes,
Poor Mailie's dead.'
('Elegy on Death of Poor Mailie.')

Or turn we to 'Man was made to mourn'—

'O man! while in thy early years
How prodigal of time!
Misspending all thy precious hours,
Thy glorious youthful prime.'

How much racier and more daintily expressed and memorable in this instance are the parallel four lines from that jewelled poem, 'Ode to the Bee'—

'Cou'd feckless creature, man, be wise,
The simmer o' his life to prize,
In winter he might fend fu' bald,
His eild unkend to nippin' cald.'

Fergusson's 'On seeing a Butterfly in the Street' interweaves exactly such ethical moralising (in a good sense) as Burns; *e.g.*—

'To sic mishanter rins the laird
Wha quats his ha'-house an' kail-yard;
Grows politician, scours to court,
Whare he's the laughin'-stock and sport
Of Ministers, wha jeer and jibe,
And heeze his hopes wi' thought o' bribe,
Till in the end they flae him bare,
Leave him to poverty, and to care;
Their fleetching words o'er late he sees,
He trudges hame, repines and dies.'

Everyone who knows his Burns will at once remember in 'The Twa Dogs'—

'Hech, man! dear sirs! is that the gate,' etc.

So onward in the same poem of the doers of the 'Grand Tour'—

'At operas an' plays parading,' etc.

'Hame Content' anticipates this and a great deal more—

'Some daft chiel reads, and taks advice;
The chaise is yokit in a trice;
Awa' drives he like huntit deil,
And scarce tholes time to cool his wheel,
Till he's Lord kens how far awa',
At Italy, or Well o' Spa,
Or to Montpelier's safter air,—
For far-aff fowls hae feathers fair.'

Fergusson's longest poem of 'Auld Reekie' reminds us throughout of Burns. With what pith and power and aptly strong words he paints religious hypocrisy, and after describing the gay throngs dressed in their Sunday clothes, all solemn-faced and grim, how fine is his scorn—

'Why should Religion make us sad,
If good frae Virtue's to be had?
Na, rather gleefu' turn your face;
Forsake Hypocrisy's grimace;
And never have it understood
You fleg mankind frae being good.'

Even Burns's 'Epistle to a Young Friend,' full as it is of wit as of wisdom and of wisdom as of wit, does not eclipse this—

'The great Creator to revere,
Must sure become the creature;
But still the preaching cant forbear,
And ev'n the rigid feature.'

Nor in the 'Twa Brigs,' thus—

'Cuifs of later times wha held the notion
That sullen gloom was sterling true devotion.'

A high pulse of patriotic enthusiasm beats in this too little studied poem of 'Auld Reekie.' How deep was his love for his native city and its surroundings, and how

impassioned his regrets over the de-nationalising of his country—as up to well-nigh 1800 it was held, and by those who were not Jacobites!

'While dandring Cits delight to stray
To Castle-hill, or public way,
Whare they nae other purpose mean
Than that fool cause, o' being seen;
Let me to Arthur's Seat pursue
Whare bonny pastures meet the view;
And mony a wild-lorn scene accrues,
Befitting Willie Shakespeare's Muse;
If Fancy there would join the thrang,
The desart rocks and hills amang,
To echoes we should lilt and play,
And gie to Mirth the lee-lang day.
Or shou'd some canker'd biting show'r
The day and a' her sweets deflow'r,
To Holyrood-house let me stray,
And gie to musing a' the day;
Lamenting what auld Scotland knew,
Bien days, for ever frae her view.
O Hamilton! for shame! the Muse
Would pay to thee her couthy vows,
Gin ye wad tent the humble strain,
And gie's our dignity again:
For O, waes me! the thristle springs
In domicile of ancient kings,
Without a patriot to regret
Our palace, and our ancient state.'

'*Fuimus*,' writes Sir William Stirling-Maxwell here, in his annotated copy of Fergusson; and even in A.D. 1897 it is not too perfervid to denounce the Duke of Hamilton's tearing down Bellenden's lovely porch and turning Queen Mary Scots' royal garden into a cabbage-field. Now we read Burns—

'Edina! Scotia's darling seat!
All hail thy palaces and tow'rs,
Where once beneath a monarch's feet,
Sat Legislation's sov'reign pow'rs!
From marking wildly-scatter'd flowers,
As on the banks of Ayr I stray'd,
And singing, lone, the ling'ring hours,
I shelter in thy honour'd shade.'

I said earlier that Fergussoniana turn up in unexpected

places in Burns's poems. Here is one of many examples. In 'Caller Water' we have—

> 'When father Adie first pat spade in
> The bonny yard of ancient Eden;'

and lo! it reappears of all places in the 'Address to the Deil'—

> 'Lang syne in Eden's bonny yard.'

Had space permitted we should have followed these parallels and (but in no ill sense) conveyings, with tabulations of words and turns of expression in Fergusson that Burns over and over employs. I can only very briefly illustrate this. Going back on 'The Election,' we read—

> 'Then Deacons at the Council stent
> To get themselves presentit;
> For towmonths twa *their saul is lent*
> *For the town's gude indentit.*'

Cf. 'Twa Dogs'—

> 'Thrang a-parliamentin'
> For Britain's *gude his saul indentin'*.'

In like manner Fergusson's double-syllabled rhymes kept ringing in Burns's memory; *e.g.* taking only one example out of abundant, Fergusson has this—

> 'Death, what's ado? the de'il be licket,
> Or wi' your stang ye ne'er had pricket,
> Or our auld Alma Mater tricket
> O' poor John Hogg,
> And trail'd him ben thro' your mirk wicket
> As dead's a log.'

See how Burns, writing in hot haste to Collector Mitchell, falls back on Fergusson—

> 'Ye've heard this while how I've been licket,
> And by fell Death was nearly nicket;
> Grim loun! he gat me by the fecket,
> And sair me sheuk;
> But by gude luck I lap a wicket
> And turn'd a neuk.'

Be it noted also that the familiar address to Death, 'Death, what's ado?' is of kin with Burns's familiarity in 'Death and Doctor Hornbook.'

The reader who wishes to pursue for himself this line of Burns's obligation to his precursor, will find it interesting to take any good glossary, *e.g.* of the Philadelphia Fergusson of 1815, or to tick off the words in any similar Burns glossary, or in Cuthbertson's Concordance. As a rule, it will be found that when the words are not Ayrshire, Fergusson has been drawn upon. This is a vein worth working.

I venture to assume that I have advanced enough to vindicate my postulate, that throughout Fergusson's poems saturated the mind, heart, imagination, affection, and memory, and imposed subjects and forms and elect words on Robert Burns. That, when all is said, Robert Burns still stands by head and shoulders above Robert Fergusson and beyond all possible comparison Scotland's supremest singer; that his was the larger, stronger soul, the richer imagination, the more inspired utterance, the more seeing eyes, the broader intellect, does not alter the fact of wide, deep, and pervasive obligations to his precursor. Mentally as physically he was stalwart where Fergusson was fragile; he was dowered with immeasurable resources where Fergusson was soon exhausted; he was master of all moods and passions where Fergusson was only their victim; he was possessor of Elisha's wished-for 'double portion' of poetic inspiration where Fergusson was at best fitfully and briefly fired and inspired. But with every limitation of genius and range, it abides that it was a happy day for Robert Burns, and a still happier day for the immortal in Scottish poetry, whereon he fell in with Robert Fergusson's volume of 1773–79. This being so, I must enter my protest against any minimising of Burns's acknowledgment of debt and fervour of gratitude. He might not be a competent judge of English poetry, and one smiles at his superlative praise of Shenstone and Mrs. Barbauld and at his way of celebrating Shakespeare (if the poem be his, which I doubt), but no man in all Scotland was better judge than he of Scottish poetry. Therefore, as it was the result of unquestionable veracity and sincerity, so it was nicest accuracy of statement of the truth, when he proclaimed that Fergusson had been his inspirer to emulation. This puts a nimbus of glory around the young Poet that never can pale. One feels, too, that Burns's acknowledgments compare more than favourably with Sir

Walter's astonishing over-statement of obligation to Maria Edgeworth; or, to go farther back, Richard Crashaw's naming his immortal things '*Steps* to the Temple' (*i.e.* of George Herbert).

Not less important as a factor in our claim for Robert Fergusson is his final *decision and election to be a vernacular poet.* This came—if I may be allowed a homely expression—in 'the nick of time.' For it is the outstanding merit of Fergusson—though merit is too thin a word—and one which peculiarly belongs to him, that, unawed by the mixed and meretricious splendour of the contemporary verse of the 'predominant partner,' he was proud of Scotland, proud of being a Scot, thrice-proud of being a citizen of Edinburgh, and patriotically proud to hold in reverential memory the achievements of our national heroes and men of 'wecht.' More than that—Wordsworth was not more exultant that he spake the language Milton spoke, than was Robert Fergusson to speak the tongue of the Scottish poets of the past, from William Dunbar and Sir David Lyndsay to Allan Ramsay. I hold it for a crown of honour that, instead of imitating the example set by Drummond of Hawthornden, William Alexander Earl of Stirling, and Sir Robert Aytoun of the prior century—though he dearly loved them all—or by immediate predecessors and contemporaries, like James Thomson, David Mallet, Dr. John Armstrong, William Falconer, Dr. John Arbuthnot, David Hume, Henry Mackenzie, and Dr. John Moore, he was not ashamed of his mother 'leid'; but saw and felt as passionately as John Ruskin of our time, the wealth, the sweetness, the vigour, the humour, the pathos, the melodious vowelled charm of native Scotch, and acted accordingly when once, as we saw, he had 'found himself.' The poet of the 'Gentle Shepherd' had with pungent appeal and rebuke addressed his fellow-countrymen on this—

> 'The chiels of London, Cam and Ox,
> Have reared up great poetic stocks,
> Of *Rapes*, of *Buckets*, *Sarks*, and *Socks*,
> While we neglect
> To shaw their betters. This provokes
> Me to reflect
> On the learn'd days of Gawn Dunkell;
> Our country then a tale cou'd tell;

Europe had nane mair snack and snell,
In verse and prose;
Our kings were poets too themsel',
Bauld and jocose.'

While 'honest Allan' lived, his remonstrance was partially successful, and he gathered around him that group of 'young gentlemen' to which we have had frequent occasion to refer. It was a group of which Edinburgh saw not the like again until a rounded century had passed. 'Fair ladies' also—Jane Elliot, Mrs. Cockburn, Lady Anne Lindsay, Lady Grizzel Baillie, earlier, gave their very finest in the vernacular. Fergusson took his stand there; but it demanded courage to do it. Have we not Professor Dugald Stewart, after Burns be it remembered, talking of our '*uncouth and degraded dialect*'?[1] Have we not Dr. James Beattie perpetrating these stupendous banalities—

'To write in the vulgar broad Scotch, and yet to write seriously, is now impossible. For more than half a century past it has even by the Scots been considered as the dialect of the vulgar.'[2]

And so the 'Gentle Shepherd' he calls 'vulgar'! Worse still, he thus writes of his own preposterously over-praised son, J. H. Beattie—

'He was early warned against the use of Scottish words and other similar improprieties; and his dislike to them was such that he soon learned to avoid them; and, after he grew up, would never endure to read what was written in any of the vulgar dialects of Scotland. He looked into Mr. Allan Ramsay's poems, but did not relish them. Whether the more original strains of Mr. Burns ever came in his way I do not certainly know.'

Detestable young prig!

Even sagacious Dr. Samuel Johnson ventured to prophesy, though he did *not* know, that

'The Scottish dialect is likely to become in half a century provincial and rustic even to themselves.'[3]

These Titanic blunderings explain how conventionalism was for the time enthroned; how pseudo-pastorals were set up as *the* mode; how the poet-tasters of the day caught

[1] *Memoir of Robertson*, p. 185. [2] *Essays*, 1779, p. 381.
[3] *Tour to the Hebrides*.

the 'tune' of Pope, but without either his concentrated weight of thought or surpassing melody. 'Vulgar' was written over any use of the mother-tongue. And yet it had been the language of Scotland's noblest and wisest, and was really more purely Saxon-English than the inane, stilted, artificial verse and prose of the period. Hence it is that I designated the appearance in the *Weekly Magazine* of 'The Daft Days,' and 'Elegy on the Death of Scots Music,' and the rest, as the advent of a new poet with a new note. I reiterate, and do not withdraw or minimise, my appreciation. These vernacular poems broke over the land like a celestial melody, and not without the trumpet-summons that Sir Philip Sidney ascribed to the ballad of 'Chevy Chase.'

I must regard it as a manly as well as a fine thing in Robert Fergusson to have thus kept his allegiance to his native tongue, a tongue 'understanded of the people.' Therefore, for what it was in itself and for the outcome of the stand taken on it, I regard the vernacular poetry of Robert Fergusson as making a landmark in our Scottish literature. For merriness and raciness and graphic touches, it was a strain that Scotland had not heard since the new cantos of 'Christ's Kirk on the Green' issued from the Luckenbooths. I avow it as my conviction that, if 'The Daft Days,' 'Elegy on the Death of Scots Music,' 'The King's Birthday in Edinburgh,' 'Caller Oysters,' 'Braid Claith,' 'Hallowfair' (both poem and ballad-song), 'To the Tron Kirk Bell,' 'Caller Water,' 'Mutual Complaint of Plainstanes and Causey,' 'The Rising of the Session,' 'Ode to the Bee,' 'The Farmer's Ingle,' 'Leith Races,' 'The Ghaists,' 'On seeing a Butterfly in the Street,' 'Hame Content,' 'Ode to the Gowdspink,' 'The Election,' 'Elegy on John Hogg,' 'The Sitting of the Session,' 'To my Auld Breeks,' had gone bodily for the first time into the Kilmarnock volume of 1786 or the Edinburgh volume of 1787, they would have been pronounced equal to most of the others, and worthy to take their place beside them. I grant that it would have been felt that none of them reached the level of 'The Jolly Beggars' (but it was posthumous), or 'The Vision,' or 'To a Mouse,' or 'To a Mountain Daisy,' or the verse-epistles, while the Songs of after-years put comparison out of the question. Nevertheless, Robert

Fergusson holds his own, and more than his own, even alongside of Robert Burns up to *his* twenty-fourth year.

A valuable element in Fergusson's vernacular poetry is that *he was to 'the manor born,' if so I may read and spell the word.* Baring-Gould in his Preface to *Songs and Ballads of the West* has excellently ridiculed the 'modern compositions of educated writers who have amused themselves in writing dialect.' They are not of indigenous growth. They spring not from the soil, but from the tomes of the English Dialect Society.

There is nothing of this artificiality or over-doing in Robert Fergusson's vernacular poetry. Born and bred in Edinburgh, a High School boy, where he inherited the metropolitan Scots, the daily speech of 'Auld Reekie' itself and of the surrounding East and Midlothian country-places of his many rural visits and haunts, our Poet never became provincial or parochial, as even Robert Burns does, to the puzzlement of more than his English-born readers. Everyone knows how this supremacy of the metropolitan speech was affirmed by William Dunbar in his word-flyting with Kennedy, and how he taunted him with his uncouth Ayrshire tongue as compared with his Lothian—

> 'I haif on me a pair of Lothian hipps
> *Sall fairer Ingles mak, and mair perfyte*
> *Than thou can blatter with thy Carrick lipps.'*

I therefore appropriate to Robert Fergusson, William Pitt's characterisation of Burns—'I can think of no verse since Shakespeare's that has so much the appearance of coming sweetly from Nature.'

There is accordingly no effort, no studying or posing for effect in his vernacular poems. He sees and he hears; he puts into his verse what he so sees and hears with a fulness of knowledge and a brightness of characterising that came to him intuitively, as his earliest preserved poems—the Horace Ode and the Elegy on Gregory, in his fourteenth year—abundantly prove.

As a first corollary of this my argument, I would remark that Fergusson *is peculiarly apt in his finding of the right words.* He never or very rarely fails to hit on the genuine answering rhyme without padding as without archaism, ever

holding in recollection that it was to his 'brither Scots' of the commonalty he mainly spoke. For he would have made his own the proud annunciation of Robert of Bourne—

> 'For lewde men I undertoke
> In Englyshe tunge to mak this boke,'—

of course reading Scottish for English, and by 'lewd' meaning not its corrupt sense to-day, but as deriven from 'leod,' the people.

Robert Burns was not above yielding his own better judgment to genteel prejudices in the matter of language, and those who would enjoy a real literary treat will hasten to get the Memoir of Hew Ainslie, by T. C. Latto, in collection of his *Rhymes and Poems*, and read his delicious badinage on Burns's altering of 'Gowan' to 'Mountain Daisy' in the great poem. There are other mistakes. Fergusson never made such; albeit as he knew nothing of the *labor limæ* there is occasional lack of finish.

Very welcome is Mr. Alexander Gordon's final verdict—

> 'Fergusson's best poetic work is slender in quantity, but it is priceless in merit. Much of it, indeed, is of the finest gold. . . . No one has handled better than he Edinburgh's "brave metropolitan utterance," as Robert Louis Stevenson calls it, the rich, racy Doric of Auld Reekie in the eighteenth century' (*Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 277, p. 392).

I do not continue the quotation, because I do not accept Mr. Gordon's exaltation of Fergusson at the expense of Allan Ramsay, and I may not tarry to refute it.

Fergusson was quite aware of his spontaneity and inevitableness. I recall his verse-letter to John Scott (?) of Berwick, when refusing comparisons with Ramsay and Penecuik, and modestly describing his own Muse—

> '*At times* whan she may lowse her pack
> I'll grant that she can find a knack
> To gar auld-warld wordies clack
> In hamespun rhyme;
> While ilk ane at his billy's back
> Keeps guid Scots time.'

Burns coarsens the close of this stanza into 'rank at their a ——.' Fergusson's is a singularly just as well as

humble estimate of his poetic gift. It was '*at times*' only, and it was a '*knack*.'

The inevitableness and truthfulness to fact of which I have been writing were well expressed by Andrew Gray in his verse-letter—

'How blyth am I whan I do see
A piece o' your fine poetrie;
It gars me laugh fou merrilie,
Because there's nane
That gies sic great insight to me
As yours itlane.[1]

Ye've English plain enough, nae doubt,
And Latin too; but ye do suit
Your lines to fo'k that's out about
'Mang hills and braes;
This is the thing that gars me shout
Sae loud your praise.'

Fergusson thus stepped in, or rather bounded in, at the right moment to give the neglected mother-tongue a new lease of life parallel with the everyday spoken speech, and thereby also he has preserved ways of thinking and feeling and speaking, 'characters,' manners, customs, observances, superstitions, peculiarities of town and country that but for him had long since flitted from men's memories. He has, in short, in association with Robert Burns, preserved for us the living Past of his native 'bonnie Scotland' as a whole, and of 'Auld Reekie' in particular, that he loved as only Sir Walter and Robert Louis Stevenson did, and has so painted for us all the lights and shadows of Scottish habits and usages and home-scenes and occupations, that they pulsate with life to-day, and ever shall.

As part and portion of all this Robert Fergusson kept alive the altar-fire of patriotism. His imagination was coloured by ballad-memories of the Border. He was the first to give Hamilton of Bangour his rightful rank as the singer of the 'Braes of Yarrow,' and so was among the first to celebrate that land—'discover' is the word of the day—over which lies the light of glory that shone from Sir Walter to William Wordsworth. We must here read 'Hame Content,' that so stirred Burns to emulation, and is found like attar of roses in poem after poem.

[1] = by itself, without consulting others.

'The Arno and the Tibur lang
Hae run fell clear in Roman sang;
But, save the reverence of schools!
They're baith but lifeless dowy pools,
Dought they compare wi' bonny Tweed,
As clear as ony lammer-bead?
Or are their shores mair sweet and gay
Than Fortha's haughs or banks o' Tay?
Tho' there the herds can jink the show'rs
'Mang thriving vines an' myrtle bow'rs,
And blaw the reed to kittle strains,
While echo's tongue commends their pains;
Like ours, they canna warm the heart
Wi' simple, saft, bewitching art.
On Leader haughs an' Yarrow braes,
Arcadian herds wad tyne their lays,
To hear the mair melodious sounds
That live on our poetic grounds.
Come, Fancy! come, and let us tread
The simmer's flow'ry velvet bed,
And a' your springs delightfu' lowse
On Tweeda's banks or Cowdenknows,
That, ta'en wi' thy inchanting sang,
Our Scottish lads may round ye thrang,
Sae pleas'd, they'll never fash again
To court you on Italian plain;
Soon will they guess ye only wear
The simple garb o' Nature here;
Mair comely far, an' fair to sight
When in her easy cleething dight,
Than in disguise ye was before
On Tibur's, or on Arno's shore.'

I will admit that Fergusson need not have made 'odious comparisons,' or in any way have dispraised his known favourites, Horace and Virgil, for as Archbishop Trench has admirably said of a like flaw in Sir Walter Raleigh's superb sonnet on the 'Faery Queen,'—'the great poets of the Past lose no whit of their glory because later were found worthy to share it' (*Household Book of English Poetry*). But in defence of Fergusson it must be said that his invective was directed against those bastard-Scots who would not let their own country's poetry or music 'share the glory,' but would—like Dr. Beattie—think to annihilate it by pronouncing the shibboleth of—'Vulgar.'

It is one of the many distinctions of Fergusson that the initial lines of the above quotation from 'Hame Content'

forms the motto of c. i. of *The Fair Maid of Perth*, while there can be no question that our Poet's tribute to Hamilton of Bangour was in recollection when Sir Walter sang—

> 'Harp of the North, that mouldering long hast hung
> On the witch-elm that shades St. Fillan's spring.'
> ('Lady of the Lake.')

This catches up Fergusson's lament—

> 'Near what bright burn or crystal spring
> Did you your winsome whistle hing?'

Scott, Leyden, Hogg, are all debtors to Fergusson—the more blamable, therefore, that the Ettrick Shepherd, whilst at the end of 'The Queen's Wake' he celebrates Bangour, Ramsay, Langhorne, Leyden, Scott, should have forgotten our Poet.

A final factor toward our claim for Robert Fergusson is *the fineness of his observation of nature and his instinctive discovery of poetry where only the hardest and harshest prose of life was supposed to exist.* I would accentuate this twofold aspect of these poems. I suspect that beloved Sir Walter did him an unintended injustice in choosing for mottoes of his immortal novels almost wholly from his city-poems, and by pronouncing him the poet-laureate of 'Auld Reekie,' that is, of town-life. I have claimed for him that he *is* emphatically that, and as such has preserved for us such pictures of the every-day and special-days ongoings as never have been surpassed for humour, for raciness, for salt of wit, for picturesqueness. But this penetrative observation of men and women, this insight into character, this Teniers and Gerard Dow-like faithfulness in reflecting low life, must be placed on a lower level than his observation of Nature and sympathy with all living creatures, even the humblest, from 'Bee' and 'Butterfly' to 'Gowdspink' and lowly lives of lowly folks.

The non-recognition of this has hidden, I hesitate not to say, no little of our Poet's most exquisite work—work inspired by the country, not the city. Nor is this other than we might have expected. For in nothing has Angellier so blundered as in his imagination that Fergusson saw nature only from some lofty garret window. This is just

the opposite of fact. For to begin with, as Stevenson warbles as Sir Philip might have done had he known Edinburgh, there was no 'airt' that men passed to or from but opened out into the country. Steepest 'close,' narrowest 'pend,' most thronged square, led to green and blue and gold, and had 'wafts' of 'caller air' and glints of gurgling 'caller water.'

In our Poet's time the city 'throned on crags' (it is Wordsworth's description) was crowded within narrow bounds, and all beyond were green fields and woods and the flashing sea.

I recall likewise that, as our narrative has shown, he had months on months in the North among the hills and forests and waters of Aberdeenshire; that some of his best poems are dated from Broomhouse and North Belton and other places in Fife and elsewhere; that for four years—as abundantly shown—he was a constant accompanier of Professor William Wilkie to his 'Cameron' farms. Hence he was no amateur in relation to the country; and with those great eyes of his, self-evidently he allowed nothing to escape him of rural life and manners.

I ask the reader to turn—after 'The Farmer's Ingle'—to the Eclogue on Wilkie, and to mark the familiarity shown, Burns-like, with all the objects of farm-life; *e.g.* 'The blades o' claver wat wi' pearls o' dew,'—'Our eldin's (= winter-fuel) driven, an' our har'st is owr,'—'Our rucks (= ricks) fu' thick are stackit i' the yard,'—'For the Yule-feast a sautit mart's prepar'd,'—

> 'Thof to the weet my ripen'd aits had fawn,
> Or shake-winds owr my rigs wi' pith had blawn,'—

'Yon broom-thackit brae,'—'My colly Ringie youf'd an' yowl'd a' night,'—'While slow-gawn owsen turn the flow'ry swaird,'—'While bonny lambies lick the dews of spring,'—'While gaudsmen whistle, or while birdies sing,'—

> 'Ye saw yoursel' how weel his mailin' thrave,
> Ay better faugh'd an' snodit than the lave,'—

> 'Lang had the thristles an' the dockans been
> In use to wag their taps upo' the green,
> Whare now his bonny rigs delight the view,
> An' thriving hedges drink the caller dew.'

All this being so, a visit to Wilkie's farm and neighbourhood to-day brings confirmatory evidence of how advantaged during all or nearly all his academic terms Fergusson was to observe the country. Therefore, while not born as Robert Burns was, or bred to farming, I claim for him fulness of knowledge, accuracy of vision, and immeasurable enjoyment in breathing the 'caller air' and drinking 'caller water.'

Then as a corollary of all this, the simple fact that he elected to take for subject 'The Farmer's Ingle,' that he discerned the possibilities of poetry in it, ranges him with Robert Burns, and antedates that *renaissance* which flowered so gloriously in Wordsworth. Since Ramsay none had thought of such a subject for poetry as 'The Farmer's Ingle.' I wish I could have turned to account here Hugh Halliburton's penetrative criticism on all this, and Mr. Henry M'Arthur's.

But 'The Farmer's Ingle' does not stand alone. How brilliant is this nature-painting in opening of 'Leith Races'!—

'In July month, ae bonny morn,
When Nature's rokelay[1] green
Was spread ower ilka rig o' corn,
To charm our rovin' een;
Glouring about I saw a quean,
The fairest 'neath the lift;
Her een were o' the siller sheen,
Her skin like snawy drift,
Sae white that day.'

No marvel Robert Burns fell in love with that 'quean'! Could any painter have given a background of landscape to the sudden vision of 'Mirth' with a finer touch? Some one has hyper-criticised that both in 'Leith Races' and in 'Holy Fair' the visions disappear. Of course, but in 'Leith Races' it is to be assumed that Mirth secretly guides to the various comic scenes and spectacles.

Take, as comparison, a winter scene, and forgive 'minimum' and 'doth' in it—

'Now mirk December's dowie face
Glowers ower the rigs wi' sour grimace,
While, through his minimum o' space,
The bleer-e'ed sun,
Wi' blinkin' light and stealin' pace,
His race doth run.'

[1] = mantle.

Another winter scene, if surpassed perhaps by Phineas Fletcher, yet rises into sublimity, and visualises Edinburgh in December—

'Mankind but scanty pleasure glean
Frae snawy hill or barren plain,
Whan Winter, 'midst his nipping train,
Wi' frozen spear,
Sends drift ower a' his bleak domain,
And guides the weir.'

Mr. Gordon asks, 'Might not these lines have been Burns's own?'

'Is there on earth that can compare
Wi' Mary's shape and Mary's air,
Save the empurpled speck that glows
In the saft faulds o' yonder rose?'

En passant, the mention of 'Mary' so sweetly, and of other feminine names, and perhaps his song of the 'Lea Rig,' suggest that Fergusson may have had his sweetheart, though his circumstances forbade marriage.

We have again and again single lines that paint us a whole landscape with touches of quaint conceit; *e.g.*—

'When Phœbus did *his winnocks steek.*'

'Upon the tap o' ilka lum
The sun began *to keek.*'

''Twas e'enin', when the speckled gowdspink sang,
When new fa'n dew in blobs o' crystal hang.'

'Now Morn wi' bonnie purple smiles,
Kisses the air-cock o' Saunt Giles.'

It were an easy task of love to multiply such 'brave translunary things,' but *pace* Matthew Arnold it is not always wise to pick out lines or couplets. Sufficient I hope has been said and quoted to make good my contention that it is not the painting of city-life which shows Fergusson at his best; and I ask that it be recollected that he shares with Burns the distinction that his 'glorious dawnings' went into that light which the great poet of Nature gratefully tells us he

'hailed when first it shone,
And showed my youth
How verse may build a princely throne
On humble truth.'

Archdeacon Hannah has well expressed the *raison d'être* of such a vindication of claim as I am leading up to for Robert Fergusson.

'The minor poetry,' he says, 'of any age has an especial historical value as savouring more of the age than the productions of greater minds; which are "not of an age but for all time"' (*Introduction to Courtly Poets*).

And again—

'When we wish to tell how a current flows, we do not look at the strong trees which grow up in its stream, and yet cannot be moved by its utmost power, but at the willows and rushes that bend before it and point to the direction in which it tends' (*Elizabethan Poetry in British Critic*, by Hannah).

This holds manifoldly of Fergusson; for while reaching back to Dunbar and Lyndsay, Henryson and Montgomery, and clasping hands with Allan Ramsay and his 'young gentlemen,' and getting into touch anticipatively with Robert Burns, he has given us the Scotland and Scottish people of his brief lifetime.

Is it said that especially his city poems of 'The Daft Days,' 'Leith Races,' 'Hallowfair,' and their kin, were too low for poetic celebration? I answer, contemporaries might have (foolishly) alleged the same objection against the odes of Pindar and Bacchylides.

My claim, therefore, for Robert Fergusson, as I have all along stated, is a modest but a definite one. He is to be gratefully remembered for what his vernacular poems did for Robert Burns; for what he did in the nick of time in asserting the worth and dignity and potentiality of his and our mother-tongue; for his naturalness, directness, veracity, simplicity, raciness, humour, sweetness, melody; for his felicitous packing into lines and couplets sound common sense; for his penetrative perception that the man and not 'braid claith' or wealth is 'the man for a' that'; for his patriotic love of country and civil and religious freedom; and for the perfectness — with only superficial scratches rather than material flaws — of at least thirteen of his vernacular poems, and for sustaining the proud tradition and continuity of Scottish song.

As for the man distinct in so far as he can be made

distinct from the poet, I have failed indeed if I have not thrown off from him for ever the Irving-originated moralising, and won for him not blame but pity; not sentencing but sympathy; not judging him by lapses through stress of circumstance but by what was best in him; and it is my hope that every reader will rejoice with me that well-nigh a century and a quarter after his poor wasted body was borne to its last resting-place in Canongate Churchyard, there are still multitudes of 'brither Scots' all the world over to whom his memory is dear and tender.

That, as over against the multitude of Edinburgh celebrities contemporary with the young 'Writer chiel,' they should be all but utterly forgotten while he is thus remembered and loved, reminds me of an entry in a 'Naturalist's Journal' of 1695 that I took opportunity to verify. This naturalist came upon tufts of a rare fern in one of the most secluded and stormiest of the passes of Moffatdale. Wandering there, and guided by the description to the very rock and spot, I there found, after nearly two hundred years, a whole breadth of the fern, as dainty and delicate and green as at the beginning.

How many human lives had in the intervening centuries ended, but the tiny fern lived on. How many fortunes of gentle and simple had changed, but the tiny fern lived on. How many disappearances had taken place of great families and family mansions, but the tiny fern lived on. Inquiry resulted in discovering great houses extinct—well-known families now unknown — splendid tombs shattered or obliterated. Is it not a parable of Robert Fergusson's fame? The modest, unpretending, homely Scottish poems of kindly humour and weighty sense have outlived books of once-called 'great' men, who would have scorned anyone who had dared to prophesy that the little volume of 1773–79 would be known and prized when their lauded folios and quartos would be lying undisturbed in Advocates' Library or British Museum. Is there another instance of so humbly-placed a Singer having at least a score of biographers? I HAVE DONE.

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